

सीतायणम्

SITAYANA

K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar

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ALSO BY K.R. SRINIVASA IYENGAR

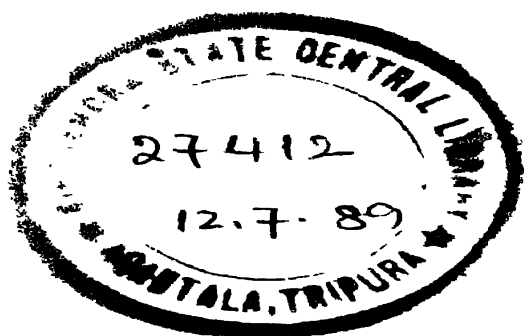
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SITAYANA
Epic of the Earth-born

K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar



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SRI RAMA NAVAMI

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	viii
PROLOGUE	xix
BOOK ONE: MITHILA	1
Canto 1 Narada and Janaka	3
2 Janaka	15
3 Janaka and Yajnavalkya	24
4 Sita's Birth and Fostering	29
5 The Girlhood of Sita	37
6 What Dreams may Come	46
7 Initiation	54
8 The Dome of Holiness	60
9 Destiny Unfolding	67
10 The Bride-Price of Valour	78
11 Sita's Marriage	84
BOOK TWO: AYODHYA	93
Canto 12 Darkness after Dawn	95
13 Ahalya's Outburst	101
14 Apprenticeship in Kingcraft	110
15 Voice of the People	117
16 The Crookback and Kaikeyi	122
17 The Great Renunciation	127
18 Sita has Her Way	137
19 Journey to Chitrakuta	145
20 Bharata	155
21 Rama on Raja Dharma	163
22 Sita and Srutakirti	172

	BOOK THREE· ARANYA	179
Canto 23	Atri and Anasuya	181
24	Inside Dandaka	187
25	Around the Ashramas	196
26	Designs for Living	204
27	Agastya and Lopa.nudra	213
28	Panchavati	222
29	The Golden Deer	230
30	The Abduction of Sita	237
31	Jatayu	242
32	Rama Disconsolate	248
33	Kabanda and Sabari	258
	BOOK FOUR ASOKA	265
Canto 34	In Ravana's Lanka	267
35	Alone in Asoka	273
36	Sita's Introspection	279
37	Trijata and Anala	286
38	The Ugly and the Beautiful	294
39	Ruminations and Lacerations	302
40	Ravana and Sita	312
41	Sita—From Darkness to Light	323
42	Sita and Hanuman	331
43	Signet Ring and Crest-Jewel	340
44	Hanuman and Ravana	347
	BOOK FIVE YUDDHA	359
Canto 45	Hanuman Reports	361
46	Vibhishana	372
47	The War Begins	383
48	Alternating Fortunes	393
49	Mandodari and Sulochana	404
50	Ravana's Dream	414

vii *Contents*

Canto	51	Kumbhakarna's Fall	422
	52	Between Despair and Hope	433
	53	Indrajit's Fall and After	445
	54	Suspense and Apocalypse	455
	55	Ravana's End	465
		BOOK SIX: RAJYA	473
Canto	56	War and Peace	475
	57	Mandodari's Lament	480
	58	Rejection of Sita	485
	59	Sita's Fire-Baptism	491
	60	Air Journey to Ayodhya	497
	61	The Coronation of Rama and Sita	507
	62	Mothers and Sisters	515
	63	A Round of Visits	524
	64	Rama Rajya	531
	65	Arastya Speaking	539
	66	Sita's Stream of Consciousness	548
		BOOK SEVEN: ASHRAMA	557
Canto	67	Holy Wedded Love	559
	68	Exiled Again	566
	69	The Ashrama Sanctuary	579
	70	Motherhood and Fulfilment	589
	71	Calm of Mind and Nightmare Visions	598
	72	'The Song of Rama'	609
	73	In the Soul's Mystic Cave	615
	74	Asvamedha and the Twin Rhapsodists	621
	75	Communion and Reunions	629
	76	Sita's Vindication and Withdrawal	637
	77	Her Grace Abiding	648
		EPILOGUE	659
		NOTES	661

INTRODUCTION

I

When my verse translation of the 'Sundara Kanda' of the *Ramayana* of Valmiki was completed and sent to the press by mid-1982, a friend suggested that I might turn to the other Kandas too. But this would have meant several volumes of the size of 'The Epic Beautiful,' and understandably enough my mind quailed before that formidable proposition. Alternatively, my friend asked, why not try my hand at an English verse rendering of an abridged *Ramayana*: for instance, *Laghu Ramayana* by Govindanath Guha? It is good in itself but based on the Eastern Recension, not the almost universally accepted Southern. Actually there are popular one-volume *Ramayana* versions in English prose, for example Rajaji's and D.S.Sarma's, and also R.K.Narayan's (based on Kamban's *Ramavataram* in Tamil). As for verse renderings, Ralph T.H.Griffith's slightly abridged version in rhymed octosyllabics came out in 1870-5, and Romesh Chunder Dutt's drastically condensed *Ramayana* in the 'Locksley Hall' metre appeared towards the close of the last century. And there is the recent gallant effort by P.Lal, partly in prose and partly in free verse.

No dearth, then, of abridged renderings of the *Ramayana* in English. And I didn't fancy a task asking for acts of selection and omission, fissioning or fusioning of individual situations, even the clipping of the wings of several characters, and carrying always a sense of guilt that one was perhaps taking too many liberties with Valmiki while still invoking his hoary name. It then occurred to me that, perhaps, I might attempt on my own a fresh recital of the *Ramayana* story but slanted as *Sitayana*, *Sitayah charitam mahat*, Sita's saga sublime. In the *Ramayana* as we have it and as Valmiki himself clearly visualised it, the web is of a mingled yarn, the sky-blue heroic story of Rama, Prince of Ayodhya, and the gold-sheened Sita story, the Epic of the Earth-born, merging with the dark-hued blood-smeared Tale of Ravana the Titan ending with his death. And Sita's tragic history fatefully links the Rama and Ravana stories.

Sitayah charitam mahat: a reverberant and talismanic phrase! With something like a reckless presumption I wished to re-tell the *Ramayana* as *Sitayana* in about a fourth of the length of Valmiki's

massive and magnificent poetic recordation. I would rely on Valmiki to the extent necessary or possible, though of course the Adi-Kavi would in no way be now responsible for the inadequacies or aberrations in my organisation of the Saga or of its detailed articulation.

In the result, the Rama-Sita story from the time of their marriage in Mithila, through the 'palace revolution' in Ayodhya, the happenings in the 'Aranya', 'Sundara' and 'Yuddha' Kandas culminating in the Coronation, becomes the essential spinal column as also the sustaining life-blood of *Sitayana* as well. But because of the intended tilt towards Sita, it was necessary to substitute 'Bala' by 'Mithila' (about Sita's birth and fostering). In the 'Aranya', Sita is carried away by Ravana to Lanka, and so it is 'Asoka' (and not 'Kishkindha') that follows 'Aranya'. The happenings in Valmiki's 'Kishkindha' are summed up retrospectively by Hanuman to Sita, when he meets her under the Simsupa tree in Asoka Grove. Valmiki's 'Yuddha' describes the war, the end of Ravana; Sita's fire-baptism, the flight to Ayodhya in the Pushpaka and the apocalyptic Coronation; and in 'Uttara', Agastya visits Ayodhya and tells Rama about Ravana's Rakshasa antecedents. 'Uttara' also describes Rama's second rejection of Sita, her finding ready refuge in Valmiki's Ashrama, and her overwhelming vindication of herself twelve years after and withdrawal into the Earth. In *Sitayana*, 'Yuddha' concludes with Ravana's death; 'Rajya' presents Sita's fire-ordeal, acceptance by Rama, the return to Ayodhya, the Coronation, and the efflorescence of 'Rama Rajya'; and the last Book, 'Ashrama', unfolds the supreme irony and supreme tragedy of the noon-time eclipse in Sita's life, her twelve twilight years in Muni Valmiki's Ashrama, the climactic second vindication and definitive withdrawal to her Earth-Mother, Madhavi.

In Valmiki, we meet Sita first at the time of her marriage. In my 'Mithila', the circumstances under which Sita was found by Janaka in the hallowed sacrificial grounds, and her childhood and girlhood years with her three sisters, Urmila, Mandavi and Srutakirti, are described in some detail. In my 'Ayodhya', while the events are the same as in Valmiki, there is some shuffling and telescoping, the happenings in Ayodhya following Rama's departure for the woods being only reported by Srutakirti to Sita later on at Chitrakuta.

In Valmiki's 'Aranya', while the earlier and later phases of the 14-year period of exile are delineated with considerable particu-

larity, the long interim is disposed of summarily with the remark that Rama, Sita and Lakshmana moved from Ashrama to Ashrama, and stayed in them for periods long or short totalling ten years (*Aranya*, Canto 11, 25-7). This blank I have tried to fill in the Cantos 'Around the Ashramas' and 'Designs for Living'. Likewise hardly anything is said in Valmiki's 'Sundara' about Sita's life in Asoka Grove during the first ten months of her imprisonment there. Here, again, I have ventured to fill the lacuna by emphasising the roles of Trijata, Anala, and their mother, Sarama. There is a good deal of self-probing, too, on Sita's part, inevitable in her intolerable loneliness and feeling of helplessness. Finally, the twelve years in Valmiki's Ashrama, mainly curtailed by silence, receive due consideration in my last Book, 'Ashrama.'

Further, since my cardinal aim was to make this quintessentially the story of Sita, it seemed natural that I should try to give distinctive—if minor—roles to her three sisters, Urmila, Mandavi and Srutakirti, all the more so because they married Rama's brothers, Lakshmana, Bharata and Satrugna. Further, of the great Rishipatnis of antiquity, Valmiki memorably limns only Anasuya, Sage Atri's wife, and dramatises her dowering Sita with presents. I thought I wouldn't be straining probability too much if Sita had meetings with the legendary Gārgi, Maitreyi, Kātyāyani, Arundhati, I opamudra and Ahalya herself, as also the Rakshasa and Vanara Queens, Mandōdari and Tārā.

While the source-of-all, the sap-of-all, is doubtless Valmiki's *Ramāyana*, I have occasionally borrowed also from the Tamil *Ramavataram* of Kampan and more occasionally still, from Tulsi Dasa's *Ramacharita Manasa*.

There is, then, the question of the 'age' of the principal characters. In my time-scheme, Rama and Sita marry when they are 16 and 14, and they spend less than a year together in Ayodhya before they are exiled to Dandaka for 14 years. They return to Ayodhya when they are 31 and 29. Another year perhaps, and Sita is exiled again. Then, twelve years after, they meet in the Aswamedha Pavilion in Naimisa forest; and as Sita returns to her Earth-Mother, she is 42 and Rama is 44. As for Ravana, Vibhishana, Sugriva and the other important Rakshasa and Vanara characters, they are all older—it is immaterial by exactly how many years—than Rama and his brothers, or Sita and her sisters. The Rishis and Rishipatnis too—Vasishtha and Arundhati, Agastya and Lopamudra, Gautama and Ahalya, Atri and Anasuya, Yajnavalkya and Maitreyi, and the

Rishis Visvamitra, Valmiki and many others who witness Sita's tremendous vindication and withdrawal—well, they may be taken to be as good as ageless.

II

I must here confess that I have made no deliberate attempt to modernise' or 'rationalise' the divers ingredients of the received Rama-Sita story. While I have no doubt refrained from any explicit references to Ravana's 'ten-headedness,' I have retained some of the 'supernatural' or 'supernormal' elements in Valmiki's narrative: for example, Hanuman's flair for waxing or waning in size, or Kumbhakarna's Gargantuan personality and seasons of prolonged slumber. In defence, I might say that, over a period of two or three thousand years, these darlings of Unreason have become inextricably integrated with our racial consciousness. We don't ask "Is it possible?"; given the 'impossible', we feel that the rest is 'probable'. Ravana, Kumbhakarna and Surpanakha, Vibhishana, Trijata and Aqala, were of the Rakshasa race, Hanuman, Sugriva and Tara of the 'Vanara' species; fearful creatures like Viradha and Kabanda, king-vultures like Jatayu and Sampati, are all endowed with the power of speech: yet their thoughts, feelings, actions,—as delineated in Valmiki—are well within the range of probability, for as character-creations they are as acceptable as the human protagonists — Dasaratha, Kausalya, Sumitra, Kaikeyi, even the Crookback, Sita herself, Rama, Bharata, Lakshmana, Guha and the rest.

Certainly, on the Rakshasa as on the Vanara side, there are supernatural exploits. But in our age of careering technology, we needn't raise our eyebrows at such feats of speed, camouflage or summary or instantaneous destruction. It is not what is already possible or a matter of daily experience in the material world that is important: what is significant is rather the behaviour of the actors (be they Rakshasas, Vanaras or humans) in different situations. Bharata, Sugriva, Vibhishana are all younger brothers, but how do they behave towards Rama, Vali and Ravana—their respective elder brothers—and why? Ahalya, Sita, Tara, Mandodari are all counted among the great *pativratas*, among the most holy, fair and chaste of womankind, and with equal justification. What is the force or grace that unites and exalts them in spite of the seeming differences?

Necromancy too plays a part in the epic action, as in the incident

of the magic deer, the Maya Sita who confounds Hanuman himself for a while, the Ghost Janaka (this, from Kamban) who fails to deceive Sita, the snake-darts and their power to strike the victims unconscious, and so on. But necromancy, while it may be a diversionary or delaying tactic, is never the definitive factor in the action. Sooner or later it is exposed, and the protagonists are presently back to Square One. In an epic recital where the central concern is with the human beings, the rest add up only to the backgrounding, the atmosphere, the battle of the elements, the invisible pulls of Providence and the dynamics of 'Fict fate: Free will'.

Even with human characters like Rama, Sita, Lakshmana, there are things that may at first strain our credulity. Rama and Lakshmana too unleash arrows charged with varied supernatural potencies, and the Brahma-shaft that Rama finally releases to kill Ravana is described vividly in Valmiki as though it was verily the forerunner of the Atom Bomb that was dropped on Hiroshima on 6 August 1945. And Sita's birth itself in a furrow may seem a charade to many, and her fire-ordeal, and her later return to the Earth, may strain our credulity and invite explanations in terms of reason.

The longevity of the Rakshasas, of the Rishis and Rishipatnis, and the decreed immortality of Hanuman need to be understood as intended. *Sitayana* is the story of Sita, and of the vicissitudes of her human relationship with Rama: the rest will have to be accepted if necessary with "a willing suspension of disbelief", a very legitimate preparation while approaching literature. After all, once logical reason sets up an inquisition, inventiveness and imagination will have to fold up and retire. Are Rama, Sita, Ravana, Guha, Sugriva, Vibhishana 'historical' figures? Could clairvoyant Ahalya, Lopamudra, Trijata see so much and so clearly? Is it possible that the happenings in Dandaka and Panchavati were wholly unknown to Bharata? or that Sita's life in Valmiki's Ashrama remained unknown to Rama in Ayodhya? And, well, how odd 'English' speeches should be put into the mouths of the characters of the Indian Heroic Age? Isn't this anachronism with a vengeance? All these caveats—and others too—may be entered against a literary work like *Sitayana*. But notwithstanding the march of the human mind, the advance of science and technology and the increasing regimentation of human life, and above all the dreaded possibility of computers rendering the human brain obsolete, there is the small voice that holds the key to the mansions of the

spirit, and imaginative exercises will be valid still. Thus, when the foreground drama concerning select human beings gradually unfolds itself before our eyes, the background—terrestrial and cosmic—comprising trees, rocks, rivers, the sky, the sun, the moon, the stars and the Milky Way, may be ageless, timeless, even though exerting an influence, beneficent or malevolent, on the lives of the characters in the foreground drama. Even so the ageless Rishis and Rishipatnis, the outsize Vanaras and Titans, and the deathless Gods—be their role helpful or baneful—may be viewed too as part of the terrestrial-cosmic background to the basically human history of Rama and Sita.

Sitayana is 'Sita's saga sublime', the story of her birth, childhood and girlhood, her marriage to Rama, their life as exiles in Dandaka for 13 years, their year-long separation and reunion, their Coronation at Ayodhya, her second sundering from Rama, her crown of motherhood, and the last scene of her self-transcendence and return to her Earth-Mother. But she isn't really separated from Rama; she is also enshrined in the hearts of Lakshmana, Hanuman and Trijata. And in our hearts too. This is the quintessential story: the rest is the needed ballast and scaffolding.

III

It is no vain claim that the Rama-Sita-Ravana story, although it belongs to an earlier civilisation, comes to us still with a wholly disarming contemporaneity of its own. And during the last 2000 or more years, the story has been told in countless ways in the different languages of India, and all over Asia as well.¹ But in these versions, not only is the invoked past seen to have a recognisable immediacy of appeal, but each writer also attempts a projection in some measure of his own time into the 'living past' that is the imperishable world of Rama and Sita. I too have been unable to resist the temptation, and without falling (I hope) into the traps and dangers of excrescent anachronism, I have tried here and there by positing the phenomenon of clairvoyance, visionary foresight and leaps of transcendence to relate some of the issues raging in our present-day world with the perennial values and verities of the world of Rama and Sita.

I cannot say how much of my *Sitayana*, as it has now shaped itself, is a direct transplant (through close translation) from Valmiki, and how much is my own in varied gradations of invention and improvisation. Probably rather less than one-fourth is a strict translation from Valmiki, but then that is also the base plank, the indispensable grounding and *elan* for the rest. Valmiki's 'Uttara' refers to the Queen Mothers' passing and Rama's withdrawal as well. But *Sitayana* ends in Naimisa after the mystical tremendum of Sita's final vindication and her determined withdrawal to the bosom of Mother-Earth. The same night, as a result of a sudden leap of self-knowledge, Rama comes to terms with his apparent defeat and the severance from Sita; and only Trijata, Lakshmana and Hanuman are privy to this new-found but subdued felicity.

When I wrote to an esteemed friend about my toying with the idea of a '*Sitayana*,' he gently warned me against the ambiguities and pitfalls ahead. The common reaction to Rama's rejection of Sita (the first time, in Lanka, seemingly driven by a surge of jealousy; and the second time as an answer to the vicious loose talk among the people) is violent disapproval, which may no doubt be construed as an expression of modern 'humanism' or even as a form of 'Women's Lib.' partisanship. The more important point, however, is that, while in other countries it is apparently natural to center Divinity in a male image, in India Godhead is equally—and even more plausibly and frequently—identified with the splendour of the Eternal Feminine in Her infinite variety of form and function and redemptive ministry. But under the influence of Western thought during the last two centuries, we too seem to have 'ditched' the softer side of our nature and destiny that womanhood, motherhood, represents, and become wholly hypnotised by the so-called rational-linear thought buttressing our masculine civilisation. In this context, a *Sitayana*—a presentation that is, as it were, complementary to the traditional Rama-Sita story and in no way repugnant to Valmiki's *itihāsa*—might not be altogether irrelevant. Thus it wasn't my intention to laud Sita at the expense of Rama, for my *Sitayana* is Rama's story too, nothing essential omitted nor "aught set down in malice;" and the fatality and seeming finality of Sita's withdrawal is followed by Rama's acceptance and transcendence of the event in the concluding Canto. Sita and Rama are alike lovable yet awe-inspiring figures, among the sublimest conceivable of humankind; and although unaware or but dimly understood by them, they also manifest powers of consciousness

surpassing the human, . . . advance human evolution towards far horizons.

As in my earlier 'The Epic Beautiful', here too the verse form used is the 10-7-10-7 syllabic unrhymed quatrain. Griffith and Dutt thought that the octosyllabic rhymed couplet or the Tennysonian 'Locksley Hall' metre was a near equivalent to the *anushtup* that traditionally precipitated itself as a spontaneous expression of Valmiki's grief on witnessing the cruel killing by a hunter of a male krouncha bird while at love-play with its mate. Actually, Dutt's long lines usually have a pause in the middle and are apt to divide into 8-7-8-7 quatrains. My unrhymed quatrain is a cross between prose and regular metrical verse, and on the basis of my limited success in 'The Epic Beautiful', I thought this was a nearer approximation to the *anushtup* movement than blank verse on the one hand or a very rigid stanza mould on the other. There is no intrusion of 'poetic diction', and I have generally steered clear of inversions, archaisms and the like. Now at the end of my labours, I frankly ask myself whether the final product isn't, after all, disconcertingly like prose cut up to look like verse. My only hope — or hope against hope — is that, along with this impression, something else also may make itself felt: for the span of thought often overflows the feet of sound in the quatrain measure, and besides breaking or softening the metrical monotony, one may feel consciously perhaps — especially when read at some length — of a reasonably viable rhythmic flow as well.

IV

A word here about the uncertain zig-zag manner in which *Sitayana* came to be written over a period of about three years. Having hesitated for months, I took the plunge at last, and wrote the 'Prologue' on 1 January 1883, after an early morning visit to the Hanuman Temple (which is also the Temple of Rama, Sita and Lakshmana) in Royapettah High Road, Madras. It was a brief hour of euphoria spurred by the faith that I had godspeed for my obviously reckless adventure from the installed Deities in the Temple.

Days, weeks passed. While I had a vague notion that *Sitayana* would be a Bridge in Seven Spans beginning with 'Mithila' and ending with 'Ashrama,' I didn't know how exactly to begin. One day, however, leaving out the 'beginning' to begin itself at the appropriate time, I plunged — *in medius res* fashion — into Dan-

daka and found it easier to wade my way through the 'Aranya'. And 'Atri and Anasuya' (although in Valmiki this episode comes at the end of 'Ayodhya') became an auspicious start. Then the encounter with the monster, Viradha; the meeting with the Sages Sarabhangha and Sutikshna; the unusual argument between Sita and Rama about ceaseless punitive action against the Rakshasas in Dandaka; and the round of visits to the Ashramas.

Suddenly, on 19 March 1883, just before dawn, the first lines of 'Mithila' came to me in a dream-state, and I got up and wrote them down:

The famed philosopher-king, Janaka,
paid obeisance to the Bard
of the Worlds, Narada, as he floated
into Mithila's domain

Now the going was good, and I went on during the next weeks and months with 'Mithila' and 'Ayodhya', till the narrative linked with the already begun 'Aranya'. The work, launched at my residence 'Matri Bhavan' in Mylapore, was continued at Visakhapatnam at my daughter Prema's place, and usually I sat under a hospitable Neem Tree (imagining it was really the Simsupa) and 'wrestled with my self-assigned task of re-telling the *Ramayana* as *Sitayana*, the same long-cherished epic Tale, but with a new shift in emphasis. There was fairly steady progress now—notwithstanding interruptions, other preoccupations, and lean periods or desert stretches of total inaction—throughout 1883 and 1884. In the meantime, I had moved from Mylapore to my son Ambirajan's new house at Alwarpet, and I paid a brief visit in December 1883 to my ancestral village, Kodaganallur, on the banks of Tambravarni. My notebooks too travelled with me, and I would make additions and alterations as the mood dictated.

Naturally, where I translated or summarised Valmiki, it was comparatively rather less taxing than when, more often, I had to draw upon my own severely circumscribed 'creative' powers. In the 'Yuddha', by opting for reportage by Trijata, Anala and Sarama rather than straightforward narration, I had created difficulties for myself. And the last phase of Sita's life in Valmiki's Ashrama asked for a meditative trance of identification for which I was of course totally unequal. There were the periodic depressions too and attacks by what can only be called (for want of a better term) 'adverse forces'. It was thus no small satisfaction that by December

1884 the first draft of *Sitayana* — running to rather less than 5000 quatrains — was ready, and I could clinch it all with the 'Epilogue'.

In the meantime, 'Atri and Anasuya' had appeared in *Bhavan's Journal* (1 August 1884), and Sita's remonstrance with Rama about his promised crusade against the Dandaka Rakshasas (Canto 24) in *Call Beyond* (New Delhi). During 1885, I returned to *Sitayana* fitfully, making additions and revisions with numerous interlineations and transpositions in the first draft. One rather substantial addition was Rama's long discourse to Bharata on Raja Dharma, which presently appeared in *Bhavan's Journal* (16 March, 1 April and 16 April 1885). Among other additions were the two Cantos (49 and 50) in 'Yuddha' relating to Ravana's Dream during the night after his defeat at Rama's hands, and the generous reprieve from the victor that the defeated might retire from the battlefield in peace and return another day to resume the fight. Yet another grafting was the meeting between Sita and Nadopasini (in Canto 69), and this episode has recently come out in *Bhavan's Journal* (16 April 1886).

The manuscript was complete at last in 12 bound note-books, and I began typing at the rate of a few pages a day, and the work concluded by mid-1865. Then the Notes, a laborious affair, and finally this Introduction. As far as I am concerned, then, *Sitayana: Epic of the Earth-born* is complete, and I offer it, with all its defects of planning and execution, at the alter of the Mother.

V

A final submission or confession. In Royapettah High Road, the Hanuman Temple is within a few yards of the Mahamahopadhyaya Kuppaswami Sastri Research Institute. On 7 May 1883, after giving a talk at the Institute on 'The Aesthesis of Irony' with special reference to the *Ramayana* of Valmiki, on my way home, I stepped into the Temple, my wife accompanying me, and we offered our obeisance to Rama, Sita, Lakshmana and Hanuman. At one level of understanding — call it the aesthetic, if you will — they are superb character-creations by the first and greatest of epic poets; and at another level — the religious and spiritual — they are emanations, divine powers and personalities who inspire sustained devotion and spray constant benevolence and protection. At the Institute, I had presumptuously ventured to weigh in the critical and ethical balance Rama's rejection of Sita at Lanka and again at Ayodhya, and Sita's strangely compelling attraction for the 'golden deer' and her hysterically harsh words to Lakshmana, as though

Rama and Sita were but flawed fellow human beings or mere characters in a work of literature, like say Hamlet and Ophelia. And a few minutes after, walking down the road and entering the Temple, we saw in the iconised Sita the Grace Divine, in Rama the living image of Eternal Dharma, in Lakshmana the flawless unfailing Serviteur of the Divine, and in Hanuman the archetypal Brazier of Bhakti or Devotion. Sita had never been separated from Rama at all; and the supreme Serviteur, Lakshmana, and the deathless Devotee, Hanuman, were around all the time, a quadruple glory of the radiance Divine for chasing all mists and smogs and shadows away.

Yes: do I, then, diet on contradictions? Very well, then; my *Sitayana* aesthesis essays co-existence with my deeper religious and spiritual needs. And this is more than—much more than—just ‘negative capability’; it is verily poetry straining after prayer and playing the paraclete-role, and at least with the Adi-Kavi’s *Ramayana*, poetic experience or *kavyanubhava* gently and imperceptibly points the way to *Brahmanubhava*. I look again and fix my soul’s gaze on Sita, now almost oblivious of the others; and I see

She is the golden bridge, the wonderful fire;
The luminous heart of the Unknown is she,
A power of silence in the depths of God.¹

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SITAYANA: EPIC OF THE EARTH-BORN

PROLOGUE

Of womanhood I write, of the travail and glory of motherhood; of Prakriti and her infinite modes and unceasing variety;	1
of the primordial Shakti's myriad manifestations on earth; of the lure and leap of transcendences of the ruby feminine;	2
of the surge of waves of the sea of bliss and the foam of ecstasy; of the naked just-born innocences and their eyes of vast surmise;	3
of girlhood reething with intimations from Powers invisible and trailing blinding illuminations from the spirit-realms above;	4
of the churn of sorrow and sufferance, of love and fatality, of Dawn's daughters bathed in beauty and love and tuned to consecration;	5
of the hearth desecrated, the hostess seized and flown to distant climes; of the intolerable sundering and the scalding memories;	6
of the drain of strength and hope, of the reign of lassitude and despair; of the climactic clash of rival arms, of the eclipse of Evil;	7
of the holy, fair and chaste on trial, and killing Darkness at Noon; of the insulted Wife's fire-ordeal, and the gold more golden yet;	8

of the interim of felicity
and the glow of sovereignty;
of the serpent-tongue and spue of poison,
and the second rejection; 9

of the heart's welcome in the Muni's hut
and the crowning motherhood;
and the injured woman's final gesture,
and the return to her Home . . . 10

O Mother, mighty, fair, immaculate,
your compassionate descent,
your divine ministry of sufferance
amidst us, hasn't been in vain. 11

Not in vain, for although the average
and even the elect fail
oftentimes in charity, yet we know
your Grace will redeem us still. 12

BOOK ONE

MITHILA

CANTO 1: Narada and Janaka

The famed philosopher-king, Janaka,
paid obeisance to the Bard
of the Worlds, Narada, as he floated
into Mithila's domain. 1

He came trailing resonances of joy
and ardour ineffable,
and his divine chants invaded the earth
and filled the air with delight. 2

After King and Sage had seated themselves
in the great Audience Hall,
they discoursed on the knot of life and death,
and the ways of Providence. 3

Janaka spoke, and the race found its voice:
"O Sage and minstrel Divine!
for all our spiralling dialectics,
certainty still eludes us. 4

I know some of the wisest of the wise
who make epic climbs of thought
or dare blinding flights of speculation
that leave me breathless behind. 5

What a galaxy of self-illuminated
ecstasies — a choice of saints,
ascetics and disciplined *tapasvins*,
and sundry effulgent seers! 6

Who's esteemlier than Satānanda,
Sage Gautama's and star-crossed
Ahalya's holy son, and exemplar
of austere and wise living? 7

And the scintillating Yājñavalkya
self-lost in the Ultimate,
and his spouse, Maitrēyī, who draws upon
the Spirit's living waters; 8

and there are others, their names are legends:
Gārgi the Vachaknavi
for example, whose gift for questioning
releases Truths ambrosial. 9

4 *Sitayana*

- Many a long year I've lived, O great Sage,
tasted the thrill of action,
the animation of debate, and known
seasons of self-transcendence. 10
- We swing between the poles of existence:
here at the nadir, a tale
by an idiot told, a race towards
the final embrace of Death; 11
- and at the summit of the mystic-stair,
a Nirvanic cessation,
a melting of the mist of Unknowing,
a taste of the Eternal. 12
- But what teases, what defeats, is the lack
of an infallible link
that makes acceptable at once both ends
of the existential run. 13
- The mind is tortured with incertitudes:
it would gladly deny one,
or the other, or both; it refuses
the proffered felicity. 14
- O wise and all-knowing Sage! could you not
minister to my unease,
my mind perplexed, and reaffirm the Law
that holds the poles together?" 15
- And Narada answered: "Need you ask me,
O philosopher-king, whose
wisdom is proverbial, and whose poise
of being is praised by all? 16
- Reason as we may, and untie the knots
of deceptive Appearance,
there's a road-sign at last barring the way:
'Beware! lest your head should fall!' 17
- The real is the immeasurable
ineffable Permanent,
but how about the foam, froth, bubble-glow
of this phenomenal life? 18
- You may wave it all away as Maya,
as the mask of illusion:
you may hug it as Lila, a dream-play
real enough when it lasts. 19

5 *Narada and Janaka*

- You want to be shown the nexus between
the two hemispheric nodes,
you want laid a granite highway linking
the contradictory poles. 20
- The shining face of Truth is camouflaged
by a blinding golden lid:
so too the sense of the symbol is lost
amidst the folds of the doll. 21
- The Horse of the Sacrifice comprehends
the whole arc of Existence,
but dazzled by detail, we sway between
immortality and death. 22
- There's the occult interpenetration
of everything in all things,
and although you may see this in a flash,
darkness covers up again. 23
- The cosmos baffles us with its vastness,
the atom by its smallness;
but look! the great is caught in the little,
and the Pearl contains the net. 24
- Yet under the stress of harsh circumstance,
the noise and fury of life,
the unitive feeling recedes or fades,
and we fall on thorns again. 25
- In our all too familiar earth-theatre,
for aeons have been witnessed
the display of demoniac might, and its
eventual overthrow. 26
- Such has always been the horrendous tale
of the Asuric ego
committing excesses that must provoke
a holocaust of itself. 27
- Animal strength and vital energy,
a tiger's terrible claws,
a jackal's cunning, a crocodile's grip,
an elephant's mountain-mould: 28
- sometimes, too, a singular ensemble
of excellent qualities,
yet marred by a single mole of nature
explosive in the context: 29

and even so, the ruthless enemies
of men and gods and the world
have from time to time, for periods long
or short, imposed their misrule, 30

and the Divine with its emanations
has had to fight like with like,
letting the biters being bit, the false
caught in their complacencies. 31

Why not, for a change, an alternative
strategy, rule of action,
philosophy of life, or askesis
of change through immobile Force?" 32

Narada paused, as if waiting to see
Janaka's first reactions,
and the King too seemed to feel uneasy
and answered after a while: 33

"Of course, O Rishi, there has been so far
a wearisome agenda:
might, courage and cunning have been mastered
by like but enhanced powers. 34

People have submitted to sufferance
when other choice they had none;
but cannot suffering itself become
a tactic of transcendence? 35

Mankind has always sought to propitiate
the gods, or the Ultimate,
with good works and liberal offerings,
or a climb towards the Light. 36

The kinetic beings, the Rakshasas,
driven inexorably
by their egos, their fatalistic push,
have won outrageous powers. 37

An invasion of the Invisible
is the mind's prerogative;
the occult is pursued and mobilised,
and the ego grows new wings. 38

But for the o'erwhelming majority—
the average and obscure—
whom power and knowledge alike evade,
there must be a simpler way. 39

7 *Narada and Janaka*

O celestial singer, Sage and Rishi,
are all puissance and power
and the higher felicity reserved
for the privileged alone?" 40

Narada seemed to relish the new turn
the dialogue was taking,
and with the hint of an approving smile
he spoke in a measured tone: 41

"It is the enigma of human life,
O King, that double-edged mind
hankers after things, and when they've been won,
finds them wormwood to the taste. 42

There's never any sense of fulfilment,
only these opposing pulls:
a mad craving for some more, or what's worse,
a dull death-like satiety. 43

A few are lost in the splendid rigours
of the grand dialectic
of introspection the exploration
and the finding of the Self. 44

Their souls shine like stars in isolation,
they dwell apart in their own
eloquent immaculate silences;
and their mere presence inspires. 45

The High Priests have mastered the minutiae
of Vedic sacrifices,
and 'tis they hold the key to the traffic
between Here and Hereafter. 46

An Asvamedha, a Vajapeya,
or similar sacrifice
may be well within the means of a King,
but not the common people. 47

And although the prime mover and gainer
may be the King, the great gifts
of the sacrifice may o'erflow and reach
the commonalty as well. 48

But there's something more, a supreme charter
for all the voiceless millions,
the drawers of water, hewers of wood,
labourers in the quarries. 49

There's a mysterious force, a movement or wafture of consciousness, an elemental cohesive power, a Grace that rules and pervades.	50,
This is the wondrous covenant called Love, the secret sustaining warmth, the primordial Law of the Universe, the sole sufficing mystique.	51
And it's well within the parameter of the humblest of humans, the wretchedest of our opulent earth, the worst wronged and most deprived.	52
This all-pervading all-prevailing Force which holds atoms together, makes the star-studded firmament revolve— or so it seems! — around us:	53
this divine law of consanguinity that cements relationships between a variety of kith and kin, and the King and his subjects:	54
unites the citizenry of Nature, the immeasurable wealth of flora and fauna, the denizens of the field and the forest,	55
the endlessly fascinating empires of birds, butterflies, reptiles, the woodland kingdoms of wet and wildness, the Himalayan glories:	56
the munificence of colour displayed in a million formations, correlated fiefdoms spotted and pieced with a lavish abandon:	57
extensive dominions of musical notes and autonomous sounds enacting contrapuntal exchanges, symphonic orchestrations:	58
and wonder ² of wonders, O King, the smells, perfumes, odours a thousand of champak, jasmine, pārijāta, rose, each with its own uniqueness:	9

9 *Narada and Janaka*

and the feel of life on earth, the softness,
the silkiness, the melting
tenderness of the sticky leaves of spring,
the friendliness of the trees: 60

and the nectarean taste of water
• as it flows in the river,
the infinite diversity of taste—
of honey, palm-wine, fruits, roots! 61

O King, don't we feel the fascination
of all this motley, this sheer
extravagance of manifestation
of our Bhuvaneshvari? 62

And it's this infallible Law of Love
that preserves our world intact
despite the play of wanton distortions,
negations and perversions. 63

What I'm saying, O King, is nothing new,
for were it not for this force
this orchestrated universe would have
gone to blazes long ago. 64

Now surely the Supreme that keeps going
this splendid cosmic concert,
that source of all Truth, Life, Light, Beauty, Bliss,
must alone be our refuge. 65

For the vast multitude, then, what's easier
than the worship of the Lord,
or the Lord and Mother Parāshakti,
in love and adoration? 66

Even the most disprivileged in life
has known, in his life's journey,
the pangs and ecstasy of love sometimes,
and the crown of fulfilment. 67

Dawn after a dark night, a rainbow arc
trailing a heavy shower,
a bird's cry, a child's smile, a gardenscape,
and we sense Love's ambience. 68

Why not, then, turn this emotion of love,
canalise and direct it
towards its own originating Home,
the Power and Grace of God? 69

11 *Narada and Janaka*

Be it the sunrise of Brahma-Knowledge,
the climb of the leaping flames
from the Sacrificial Hall, or good works
as prayer of the body, 80

the elect or the chosen have always
won their release from bondage,
but leaving unredeemed the milling mass
of miscellaneous mankind. 81

It looks to me, O minstrel of the Spheres,
that what you expound could be
the ready infallible means for all
mankind to return to God." 82

Narada, Traveller of the Worlds, smiled
as if feeling gratified
with King Janaka's insightful response,
and presently continued: 83

"The way of love and devotion, O King,
may have lured some in the past,
yet it's our time and the ages to come
that will need this Sun-lit path. 84

But there's a catch too that might inhibit,
for the heart's not easily
engaged by a Power only inferred,
not confronted face to face. 85

Those that are vouchsafed apocalyptic
unforgettable visions
are few, and as for the others, they look
for the incarnate Divine. 86

Sudden flashes that reveal the summits
are fast overtaken by Night,
and the mind in its unease is shrouded
by the clouds of confusion. 87

In this rare hour of the unexpected,
so instinct with potency
and promise, the call is for the advent
of the visible Divine. 88

The King-Whale, the Tortoise, the Giant-Boar,
the terrible Man-Lion,
the brief sojourn of the Dwarf-Colossus:
they were of the ages past. 89

- If only our age with its discontents
 and proneness to suffering
 could invoke the descent of the Divine
 in a meltingly fair form, 90
- that Radiance, the blessed Feminine,
 that compassionate Power,
 that symbol of Shakti as sufferance,
 might usher in a New Dawn. 91
- The unnumbered millions of the faceless
 anonymous unredeemed
 of the earth might cry with their hearts of love
 and feel invaded by Grace. 92
- When the miscellany of unredeemed
 humankind, the occupants
 of this greatly flawed but unfinished world,
 perceive the divine-human: 93
- someone that's seemingly bone of their bone
 and flesh of their flesh, subject
 to the uncertainties of human life
 yet triumphantly divine: 94
- this may signalise a new adventure
 of consciousness, enacting
 a beyonding of human misery
 by the fire of sufferance. 95
- It may seem paradoxical, O King,
 but a new incarnation,
 the Grace as feminine incandescence,
 may yet redeem the wide world; 96
- a manifestation and ministry,
 recognisably human
 yet intrinsically Divine, may charge
 all the earth with life anew. 97
- Flawed but aspirant humanity needs,
 not a heady cosmic stair
 between the sloughs and the far-off summits,
 but such a living Presence. 98
- The maimed are scared by the stairway and pray
 for a braz'er of Grace
 and Glory, not the less human, although
 quintessentially divine."

- The King of Videha now let the words
 seep into his soul's stillness,
 and hearkening to the voice from the depths,
 spoke measuredly to the Sage: 100
- "All past discontents and all future hopes
 find speech in you, Sojourner
 in the Spheres, and you would coax the coming
 of an earth-descended Grace. 101
- But the earth has seen avatars ere now,
 and you've listed some of them;
 but always, after a brief interim,
 chaos has trooped back again. 102
- And Mahalakshmi has manifested
 and destroyed the Asura
 Mahisha; and Mahasarasvati,
 both Shumba and Nishumba. 103
- Again and again the Power Supreme—
 or its prime Emanation —
 has fought to contain the Asura's might;
 yet he bounces back, always!" 104
- "Think, not, Enlightened King," said Narada,
 "all hope of good is hopeless;
 it's still an incomplete world that we see,
 and the churning must go on. 105
- Sunrise and sunset and sunrise again,
 the rhythm of the seasons,
 the cycle of birth, growth, decay and death,
 no mere monotony this! 106
- In the great cosmic choreography,
 the Divine is self-involved
 in the unfolding of Evolution
 for the Future's ordering. 107
- Diverse the deputations from Above
 that are tested and withdrawn;
 now it may be the turn of Woman, fair,
 fire-pure and long-suffering!" 108
- Alert to seize the clue, Janaka cried:
 "Blest Seer! you've said already
 that on our earth sword has been met by sword,
 cunning by greater cunning. 109

And as this see-saw seems an endless game,
aren't you prophesying, then,
another of the Transcendent's descents,
now as Mother of Sorrows?" 110

The Sage answered with a smile: "A prayer,
a hope, but no prophecy;
after the violence and waste of crime
and reprisal, what remains?"

O Seer-King, it's time you initiated
a Sacrifice, and gave shape
and substance to the anguish of the race,
and its hope of redemption.” 112

Then, with a gesture of benediction,
the preeminent Bard rose
and disappeared in the air high above
scattering ambrosial notes.

But the harmonies encircled the earth
for its greater well-being,
like the ineluctable melodies
of the music of the spheres. 114

Canto 2: Janaka

Back in his private chambers, Janaka
the Mithilan patriarch
felt the birth-pangs of a seminal thought
and looked for sanction within. 115

As he sat in a meditative pose
he knew not hours, days or nights;
all thoughts, hopes, despairs were in a fury
of fusion and extinction. 116

In the cleared sky of his quietened mind
he saw forms appear and pass,
and it was as though a rare tapestry
demanded his attention. 117

First Nimi his hoary progenitor,
whose Sattra Sacrifice ran
into disaster, his High Priest cursing
and being cursed back in turn. 118

How vulnerable were the ways of men:
the best of Sages! the best
of Kings! Was it fatality that drove
the two to instant ruin? 119

Yet the High Priest achieved rebirth, and claimed
Mithra-Varuna as Sire;
and Nimi, churned in the sacrificial
Fire, emerged as Janaka. 120

Hadn't Nimi asked for his soul's safe lodgement
within the eyelids of all?
The eyes and ears of the world! the heart-beats
of all, all living creatures! 121

Thus Nimi became Mithi the Churned One;
and Videha, for he had
lost and found his body; and Janaka,
the marvellous puissant one! 122

That was the founder of the Dynasty,
the forerunner of his race;
the first of the Rulers of Mithila,
and the great Vaidehan King. 123

After that well-beloved sainted King,
 his son, Udāvasu; then
 his son, Nandivardhana; and so on:
 Suketu, Devarata. 124

The revered Brihadrata succeeded;
 then gallant Mahavira,
 Sudhriti, Dhrishtaketu, Haryasva,
 and a royal line of kings: 125

Maru, Prateendhaka, Keertirāta,
 Devamīdha, and Vibhu:
 and four worthy generations after,
 the mighty Hrasvaroma. 126

Like a series of stately forest oaks
 that genealogy stood out;
 and in the austere poise of his silence
 the King felt the reign of peace. 127

As sons of the righteous Hrasvaroma,
 the brothers Janaka and
 Kusadhvaja had been ruling by love
 Mithila and Videha. 128

But was there a hint, perhaps, of divine
 dissatisfaction? The thought,
 as often before, crossed his horizon
 even in that state of trance. 129

All was abolished indeed, all flutter
 of excitement, all fever
 of self-flaggelation, all spasmodic
 schemes to fashion the future. 130

No son sprung from his loins would succeed him
 on the throne of Mithila;
 but, then, he had presumed not to question
 the decrees of Providence. 131

But what did Rishi Narada intend
 by casting the seed of this
 ambrosial idea, a Sacrifice
 for the racial well-being? 132

In the solvent of unrelenting Time,
 Yugas and Manvantaras
 with their bulging and bursting dominions
 have left few traces behind. 133

What the curious human eye perceives
amid all the tricks and turns
of the ages is a mosaic of truths,
half-truths and lies seen darkly. 134

But in rare moments of self-exceeding
the dichotomies may merge,
the divisive walls tumble and dissolve,
and peace crystallise at last. 135

In a sudden canter of consciousness
Janaka saw the border
between surmise and certainty vanish,
and felt half-dazed by the Light. 136

What was that Radiance unparalleled
that had neither concrete form
nor force, yet whose native silence of Grace
shone as invincible Might? 137

'Twas now as though a million elements
of feminine sovereignty,
a million Lights of the joy of the world,
had coalesced with the Vision. 138

But viewed again, from a different stance,
wasn't the glory incarnate
the pooled reservoir of the tears in things,
the true sufferance sublime? 139

The serenity of the cow-goddess:
the bedewed face of the Dawn:
the taut resignation of the bereaved:
all made that marvel image. 140

Or was it only an insubstantial
dream-vision, or possibly
a parable of the pure saviour-grace
of the twilight of the gods? 141

That icon of beauty ineffable
carried the infinitudes
of suffering and melting compassion,
and breathed an other-world air. 142

She seemed young yet ageless, her serene smile
signified endless travail,
her poise of perfect immobility
seemed to screen the Wheels of Doom. 143

Even in the deep quiet of his trance
the King felt the invasion
of an incomprehensible delight,
the sheer reign of ecstasy. 144

It was a tearing of Appearances,
a shattering of the veils,
an unearthly apocalyptic flash
that opened up everything. 145

That single visage, rich and radiant,
and the ensemble of limbs
seemed the sum of the past, present, future,
and their legacy of pain.

Varied yet harmonising were the lights
that seemed to play hide and seek,
yet presented an arrested moment
in the dance of a goddess. 147

The Sage fixed his steady reverent gaze
on the manifestation
human and divine, youthful and mature,
transient and eternal.

His enraptured eyes shifted from the feet
so small, shapely, behovely,
and lingeringly dwelt on the Mother,
her all-comprehending look.

And he felt confused, and he imagined
he heard polysymphonic
voices, or glimpsed kaleidoscopic turns
of candid femineity. 150

She was not goddess, she was not woman,
she was not the Beloved;
she was neither Empress nor servant-maid,
neither mother nor daughter.

She was inclusive, not isolable;
 creatrix, mediatrix,
 hermitress, enchantress, Mother of Love,
 Madonna of Might and Light!

In a vouchsafed moment of clairvoyance,
the Sage saw the full circle
comprising in its elected spaces
the terrestrial drama: 153

all the complex manifoldness of life,
all dazzling contradictions;
the ironies of miscalculation,
the epics of achievement; 154

the satires of sinister circumstance,
the lyrics of self-abuse;
also the slow climbs of aspiration,
the answering gifts of Grace!

Even in his imperturbable calm —
his body a living soul! —
there was now a strange commotion within,
and the stasis was ended.

The gateways to the Future burst open,
vista succeeded vista,
the incompatibles clashed and mingled,
and the scenic-sequence dimmed.

As he half figured out the intestine
struggle, the serpentine twists,
a shudder almost convulsed his being,
and he felt least like himself. 158

A serried hierarchy of realms—the worlds
of Light above, the nether
worlds of Darkness, and the regions between:
a blinding apocalypse!

But the traditional categories—
good and evil, fair and foul.
joy and suffering—wrestled and writhed like
a maddened knot of vipers.

At the apex of the cone of brightness,
the tartarean black holes;
and at the nadir of compulsive night,
the Grace-Light of renewal!

Aweð was the inheritor of Nimi:
his seeing and feeling eye
felt repelled by a world without pity
and incapable of love.

As the singular images sprouted,
burst into bloom, then parted
from the parent, sought novel adhesions
and achieved transformation: 163

there behind the baffling vicissitudes
bearing and sustaining all,
the Mother immaculate reigned supreme,
solely and severally. 164

In a luminous moment of self-sight
he read the mystic message,
and receptive to a great rush of hope
felt transcendently free. 165

Thus the sinking into the oblivion
of zero-infinity
meant the shattering of all barriers
and mingling with the waters. 166

The dissolution of all difference
was yet an invitation
for a perfect sharing of essences
and new crystallisation. 167

Now completely restored to waking life
and its pressing anxieties,
the Lord of Mithila wondered how long
the trance-state had tethered him. 168

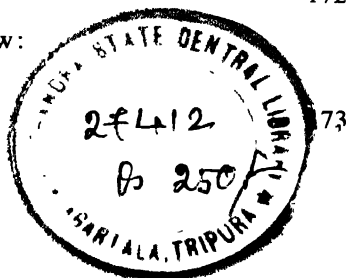
An hour or a week of days meant nothing;
he was, as often before,
translated to a world where he could feel
there was no more time at all. 169

The emergence out of stark nothingness
had likewise meant a rebound,
a willing acceptance of the cage-house
patented by Space and Time. 170

The sojourn to the realms invisible
had alternately tossed him
between the raging gulfs of division
and the lone summit of Grace. 171

With no great effort, the Sage could shake off
the clinging clothes of dolour
and return to the primordial Mother
with a heart tuned in prayer. 172

Everything came back to Janaka now:
the descent of Narada,
the unforgettable conversation,
the parting exhortation.



Initiate a Sacrifice, the great Bard
 had suggested, one that would
 articulate the racial agony
 and prayer for retrieval. 174

Janaka hadn't let his childlessness prey
 on his sensibility,
 but the music of humanity's pangs
 was a different matter. 175

Destiny had cast upon him the role
 of the Leader of the Race,
 and he had inherited great Nimi's
 universal sympathies. 176

The flickering of eyelids anywhere,
 the saltish burn and release
 of the flood of tears from the deep whirlpools
 of the tortured human heart : 177

Nimi had suffered a profound kinship
 with the trials and sorrows
 of the race everywhere, and Janaka,
 his trustee, could do no less. 178

It was in order, then, he should issue
 the call for a sacrifice
 for universal human well-being
 and the start of a New Age. 179

The King now recalled the Horse Sacrifice
 near the banks of Sarayu
 for the widely revered Dasaratha's
 attaining a worthy heir. 180

That was less than three years ago, and great
 was the mobilisation
 of Ayodhya's resources, secular
 as well as spiritual. 181

Janaka was present in Kosala,
 a prized guest, and had watched how
 Vasishta and Rishya-Sringa guided
 the steps of the sacrifice. 182

The King of the Kekayas was there too,
 and so were Romapada
 of the Angas, the Lord of Kasi, and
 Kings from the East, West and South. 183

- A complex of ritual and mystique
and sustained aspiration,
the Sacarifice had gone on for some days
fulfilling the requirements: 184
- the grand ceremonial installation
of the sacrificial stakes;
the high architecture of the altar,
the sure kindling of the flame; 185
- the hundreds of animals, snakes and birds
gathered for the Sacrifice,
and, centrally, the magnificent Horse
for the ritual slaughter; 186
- the pressing of the *soma* elixir,
and its offer to the gods;
the rhythmic chants of the ordained mantras,
and oblations in the Fire. 187
- Janaka could now recall Kausalya,
Dasaratha's eldest Queen,
her eyes lit with faith, drawing symbolic
cutting sword-lines on the Horse. 188
- The ceremony so complicated,
aiming at the annulment
of sins, had proceeded without a hitch;
and Dasaratha was blest. 189
- Only then, cleansed of past rusts, could the King
seek Rishya-Sringa's gracious
intervention for the prolongation
Of Ikshvāku's royal Line. 190
- That famed Rishi had then initiated
the decisive Sacrifice,
and the emerging milk-food for the Queens
had meant the birth of the sons. 191
- A burst of great rejoicing had greeted
the first-born, known as Rama,
Kausalya's son; Bharata, Lakshmana,
Satrughna were the others. 192
- As he recalled how Narada had sown
this sole idea so pregnant
for the future, Janaka felt a stir
of hope in his deeper self. 193

He knew the whirl of phenomenal life
 was also a Sacrifice;
 Prakriti had her own intriguing ways
 of kneading and shaping things. 194

But it was Man's prerogative alone,
 not lazily to accept
 the badges of his defects and defeats,
 but strive for their surpassing. 195

The question was larger than Mithila,
 and Janaka felt concerned,
 not because Nimi's royal line of Kings
 ran the risk of extinction: 196

humanity's fate was itself at stake—
 whether it would accomplish
 sure self-mastery and self-surpassing
 giving a lead to Nature, 197

or whether, with his veiled rapacity
 coming into the open,
 purblind Man would only run the mad race
 towards annihilation. 198

This was the overwhelming question: whether
 the human race wouldn't enact
 sane living and survive, and march towards
 a new Heaven, a new Earth. 199

Janaka's dream-vision of the glory
 that backgrounds all existence:
 could he but coax its puissant Presence *here*
 what might not be accomplished? 200

Dasaratha had sought Rishya-Sringa's
 help, and now Janaka felt
 he should have a word with Yajnavalkya
 before making up his mind. 201

Canto 3: Janaka and Yajnavalkya

- Not long after, the King of Mithila
met the sage, Yajnavalkya,
in the spacious grounds of his hermitage
to seek his mature counsel. 202
- After the disciples had taken leave,
Janaka made a report
of Rishi Narada's recent visit,
and the drift of their debate. 203
- "Stationed as you are in Brahma-Jnana",
said Janaka to the Sage,
"advise me, O First of the Enlightened,
how best I may serve the race." 204
- Awhile Yajnavalkya was rapt in thought,
and then found the fitting words:
"There's nothing you don't know, O King among
Rishis, and realised One! 205
- The celestial Bard wings and sings his way
throughout the worlds of the gods,
men and titans, and makes a sweep from Time
past to the furthest future. 206
- His seminal reading of the complex
of terrestrial ends and means,
his hint of a redemptive Sacrifice,
his parting benediction — 207
- Certainly, O scion of Mithi's line,
the Bard's visitation, its
timing, urgency and authority,
imply sanction from afar. 208
- And yet, O King, as you're doubtless aware,
there's a hierarchy of planes
of consciousness, and all must depend on
where you are, and what you want. 209
- Many are those caught in the endless coil
of the human adventure,
and all they seek is a repetition
of the old cyclical whirl. 210

Some few who have achieved self-mastery
and ceased to be passion's slaves
may transcend the round of likes and dislikes
and shine as Jivanmuktas. 211

When one cannot see oneself as distinct
from the concert of the whole,
where is the room for fresh preferences
or measures to attain them? 212

When one's caught in the cosmic passion-play,
one sees the discordances
as notes of the evolving symphony
racing forever forward 213

O King, you had yourself reacted once
on the report of a fire:
'Should even all Mithila be ablaze,
why should it concern my Self?' 214

No doubt, the moment the words were spoken,
another courier came
and gave news the fire had been extinguished,
and relief was in progress. 215

How can I advise, O Raja Rishi,
since you are yourself grounded
on the limitless and immutable,
and nothing is hid from you?" 216

Janaka let the words sink deep within
and filter into the soul's
recesses, and assessing the issue,
made answer to the great Sage: 217

"I still falter and fumble on the path,
O blest Seer and rare Master,
and the burden of kingship oft obscures
the vision of the Jnani. 218

And, besides, as Father of my Nation
and Leader on its onward
march, there are expectations and duties
that I may not quite disown. 219

It is easy enough to underline
the symbolic overtones
of the celebrated Asvamedha,
the best of Sacrifices. 220

The roaming Horse, majestic and mighty,
 exuding infinite force;
 Time be its heart-beats, freedom its playground,
 and the worlds are its domain. 221

Nature in her lavish munificence,
 as also in her faultless
 sense of the minutiae, is reflected
 in the sacrificial Horse. 222

Dawn is the Horse's head, the Sun its eyes,
 the Wind its breath, Fire its mouth,
 the year and the seasons are its body,
 the days and nights are its feet. 223

The Horse rests on the hard material earth;
 its belly contains all space;
 its back is the soaring paraclete-mind
 reaching up to the summit. 224

A Riddle commuting between the East
 and West — or Day and Night — and
 poised for the forward leap, the Horse sublime
 is also the Mount of all. 225

For Devas, speed of movement and delight;
 for Gandharvas, the good life;
 for Asuras, force and might abounding;
 and for Man, self-transcendence. 226

Here at this end, the Asvamedha rites;
 there, beyond names, forms, actions,
 the Sunrise of Knowledge; and in between,
 gradations of Ignorance! 227

And O Sage, I remember the day when,
 during an Asvamedha,
 you had the cows and gold taken away,
 steadfast in Brahma-Knowledge. 228

Some like Asvala thought it presumptioⁿ
 but had to acquiesce at last,
 on a later occasion, you taught me:
 'Atman is the Light of lights.' 229

For the realised person, the problem
 simplifies itself: he lives
 in his native Infinity, a drop
 of dew on a lotus leaf. 230

But the teeming masses of our people
cannot construe the Symbol,
nor by force of askesis rush beyond
or attain self-mastery. 231

The steady build-up of Karma Kanda,
the step-by-step unfoldment
of ritual, the swell of the chants, and
the climb of the tongues of flame! 232

The common citizenry who witness
the mysteries have the feel
of sharing it all, and their prayers too
receive answer from Above. 233

Sometimes, O Sage, when I see my people
shiver in the cold and dark,
or writhe in their hardly veiled agonies,
my *māna* wanes to nothing. 234

It all strikes me too poignantly vivid
to deserve the name *māya*;
and to describe it as the Lord's *līla*
will be mere impertinence. 235

O wisest of Sages! I feel confused,
I want the people to know
I share their private anguish and trials,
and all their resilient hopes. 236

While human effort is necessary,
it's a poor thing in itself;
yet some forward push, or what looks like it,
may break the present impasse. 237

Is there no way I can conscientiously
abide by Narada's wish,
while insulating the action from all
taint of personal desire? 238

Nor can I dismiss as mere fantasy
the gloried Vision that stole
the stage during my meditative trance
after the Bard's withdrawal. 239

O great Sage, that face gracious, grave and sad,
that reflected everything
what somehow annulled the dualities,
that face Divine haunts me still." 240

He stopped, feeling suddenly paralysed
 by the inadequacy
 of language; and Yajnavalkya saw all,
 and gently answered the King: 241

“I’ve heard you with attention, O wise King,
 and, indeed, the heart’s motions
 may not summarily be brushed aside
 as a trap or illusion. 242

What, after all, was Rishi Narada’s
 exhortation? That you should,
 viewing the current human condition,
 initiate a Sacrifice. 243

I think that’s what you should do: the hallowed
 site that has seen so many
 sacrifices in the past is ready
 for propitiatory rites. 244

Make the first of beginnings with a plough
 on that stretch of the green earth,
 and the rest will unfold in due process
 of the Law of Becoming.” 245

There was nothing more to say on either
 side, and Janaka took leave
 of the Sage, having silently renewed
 their kinship in the Spirit. 246

Canto 4: Sita's Birth and Fostering

Backgrounded by the far Himalayas,
the green earth of Videha
nurtured at its heart the fair Mithila,
the jewel among cities. 247

After a session with his ministers
and High Priest, Satananda,
Janaka set in motion the process
to get the Yāga started. 248

When the preliminaries were over,
on the selected morning
an hour before the Sun awakes, the King
hurried alone to the grounds. 249

His hands held firm the consecrated plough,
and as he made the first push
he turned the sod to cleanse the site once more
for the ancient ritual. 250

For Janaka, King of the Videhas,
it was a prayerful act,
a planted king-idea germinating
and ready for fulfilment. 251

Poised between the infinitudes without
and within, his hands guided
the old ploughshare with an infallible
sense of time and direction. 252

He had not progressed far, when suddenly
a lightning-flash crossed his path;
he stopped, and his dazed eyes fell on the form
of a wondrous golden child. 253

Since the vision had sprouted as it were
from the opening furrow,
the enraptured Janaka cried 'Sita!'
and bent down in gratitude. 254

Imaging Pity as well as Power,
the lone naked new-born babe
seemed a visitant from Heaven, and smiled
on fair Earth's bounteous bosom. 255

- With Maitrēyi and Kātyāyani came
the *jñani* Yajnavalkya,
and as though his prevision saw it all,
he prayed, and blessed the Earth-born: 266
- “I see no conventional destiny
for this Daughter of the Earth:
her beauty of form and soul's radiance
signify new times ahead. 267
- In past ages, the great incarnations
of Shakti fought the demons
on their own chosen ground of violence
and annihilated them. 268
- Mahakali, goddess with glowing eyes,
regal Parameshvari
releasing Vishnu from sleep, helping Him
kill Madhu and Kaitabha; 269
- Mahalakshmi, the sum of all divine
emanations, wearing her
string of beads, wielding bow and arrow, mace
and lance, cudgel and discus, 270
- the ferocious Shakti fighting, killing,
Chikshura and Chamara,
Durdhara, Durmukha, Mahahanu
and the mighty Mahisha; 271
- and Kaushiki, Mahasarasvati,
invincible Chandika,
in defence of the desperate Devas
defying and destroying 272
- a whole host of malignant Asuras,
the fierce Dhūmalōchana,
and Chanda, Munda and Raktabīja,
and Nishumba and Shumba. 273
- Divers the Names and Manifestations,
the ministries manifold,
the battling with the adverse formations,
the crowning celebrations: 274
- Maheshvari, rider on bull, bearer
of trident, moon and serpent,
boar-like Varahi with earth-moving tusk,
terror-shaped Narasimhi: 275

and in these and other variations
of form and force and function,
the same infinite creatrix spirit
has played her redemptive roles. 276

This latest of Shakti's emanations
may play the sheer melting role
of sublime sufferance and alchemic
action and transformation." 277

The words sank in the deeper quietude
of Janaka's consciousness
and merged with Rishi Narada's vision
of an auspicious Future. 278

The Earth-born wondrous child, the innocence
that was pure Grace and Glory,
was the darling of all as 'Janaki',
'Maithili' and 'Vaidehi.' 279

While Sita, with an anxious fostering
from the Queen and the nurse-maids,
grew in sun and shower and the rhythm
of days, nights and the seasons: 280

Janaka resumed his interrupted
work on the Yāga-Bhoomi,
and the Sacrifice itself ran its course
and furthered global welfare. 281

A burst of efflorescence was witnessed
in Videha, and within
a year, Sunayana the Queen gave birth
to a daughter, Urmila. 282

What a perfect companion for Sita!
they could now grow together,
the sisters Janaki and Urmila,
and they teamed almost like twins. . 283

And Kusadhvaja, Janaka's younger
brother, was blessed likewise, for
his wife presented him with two daughters,
Mandavi, Srutakirti. 284

They were flowers in the royal garden
of Janaka's Mithila,
and the four princesses passed together
their childhood and girlhood years. 285

33 *Sita's Birth and Fostering*

Later, when the ambitious Sudhanva,
King of Sānkāśya, besieged
Mithila, he died fighting Janaka
in a fierce single combat. 286

Kusadhvaja was then anointed King
of Sānkāśya, and his Queen
and his twin daughters went with him, though loth
to be parted from Sita. 287

The miracle of movement from childhood,
through the brief but bountiful
spring-time of girlhood, was now enacted
in the two royal cities: 288

here in Mithila, there in Sānkāśya,
now all four as a quartet,
and soon, a duet each, in Janaka's
and in Kusadhvaja's realm. 289

In God's garden of growing consciousness,
Sita and the Videhan
sisters orchestrated their symphonies
of progressive Becoming. 290

They were the marvel feminine indeed,
but Sita excelled even
the shy Urmila, the wise Mandavi
and the smart Srutakirti. 291

Comrade and leader at once, Sita gave
her sisters, and all girlhood
in Mithila, an accession of hope,
faith, courage and holiness. 292

And her beauty was not of the kind sung
in old epic and romance,
but blazed as a radiance from the Self,
the mystic Agni within. 293

Delighted as he was to see the bud
of their native excellence
open to the Sun petal by petal,
and day by day, year by year: 294

Janaka was still constantly intrigued
by Sita's manifoldness
of femininity and veiled ministry
defying comprehension. 295

Often he recalled the inscrutable
circumstances of her birth:
was it a human — or human-divine —
or divine intervention? 296

Not that it mattered though, for after all,
who could ever pluck the heart
of a mystery so tantalising
as that of Sita's coming? 297

Yet Narada's parting exhortation,
the Face in the dream-vision,
Yajnavalkya's lead, and Sita's advent:
all somehow chimed together. 298

But for the commoners of Mithila,
there were no ambiguities;
Sita was the adorable Earth-born,
the unique gift of the gods. 299

Although no inheritors of a like
natal mystery, her three
sisters shared with her the people's total
love and feel of joy and pride. 300

Responsive to the constant and subtle
calls of circumambient
Nature, the wealth of flora and fauna,
the sisters breathed communion. 301

The configuration of earth's contours,
the varied inventory
of lakes, rivers and underground waters,
the numberless life-species: 302

the sustained battle of the elements,
and the profounder rhythm
and balance; the cycle of the seasons,
and the unstruck melodies: 303

with an agenda for education
so full yet unselfconscious,
and a free exposure to the concert
in continuous unfoldment: 304

the antennae of the senses ever
alert to observe, react,
discriminate, record, assimilate
and achieve integration: 305

- and so the sun and moon and stars and clouds,
the date-palm and mango trees,
the lotus ponds, the meandering brooks,
the strong champak in blossom: 306
- the herds of deer in the gardens, the swans,
peacocks, the resourceful vines
and creepers, the ravishing singing birds —
all made the Book of Nature. 307
- From their close involvement in the daily
drama of Nature and Man,
Sita and her sisters gained mastery
of the native arts and crafts. 308
- Mithila was an extensive garden,
and the gorgeous Himavant
towered magnificent at a distance,
a divine munificence! 309
- The seasonal rhythm kept steady pace
with an endless regiment
of colours put forth by the abundant
green and gold of Videha. 310
- The Mithilan native art of painting,
firm in line and fantastic
in colour, flourished as Madhubani,
the honeyed extravagance! 311
- A riot of colours — indigo-blue,
grass-green, palasha-orange,
kusum-red, milk-white, turmeric-yellow —
coalesced into the mosaic. 312
- And legends like Pururavas winning
back Urvashi from the gods,
or Uma's aspiration for Shiva,
found splendid recordation. 313
- Thus Sita and Urmila, Mandavi
and sprightly Srutakirti,
these four with some few others of their age,
essayed learning and self-growth. 314
- And this great adventure of consciousness —
from almost the nether end
of Inconscience, and cantering beyond
the vital and the mental, 315

and reaching up to the dizzy plateaus
of the imaginative,
intuitive, or still higher zones — added
new dimensions to their lives.

Canto 5: The Girlhood of Sita

And so the Mithilan sisters — Sita,
Mandavi, Srutakirit,
and the withdrawn and gentle Urmila —
had their time of fostering; 317

and they would sometimes, consorting with friends,
engage in banter, or tease
one another; or Janaki's 'earth-born'
aura would raise strange queries. 318

"We're all earth-born, aren't we?" Sita would ask,
"why make all this fuss about
my being picked up from the furrowed earth
as a nude new-born baby? 319

Perhaps there was no mystery at all;
maybe some links are missing;
maybe an immaculate conception
preceded my unique birth! 320

Possibly, there's much more in it than this,
for since my filial feeling,
strong as it is, may not be fixed upon
a single human mother — 321

of course I love Mother Sunayana,
I love Mandavi's mother
and every mother in Mithila, and
all mothers in Videha — 322

still it's certain a deep affinity
with her colour and contours
and smells and splendid personality
draws me always to our Earth. 323

There are times when my whole being — my soul
and heart and body's nerve-cells
and all the aggregates that comprise me —
chime with this dear Earth-Mother. 324

Sundry unpredictable hours find me
sensitive to the pulse-beats,
breathings, exultations, lacerations
/ and frenzies of the Mother. 325

Millions her progeny every minute,
 and infinite her concern
 for their well-being, growth and maturing,
 and infinite too her groans! 326

Sometimes I needs must wring my anguished heart
 in impotent sympathy
 for this our poor long-suffering Mother,
 the exploited and disowned. 327

The very children who should humbly make
 their choicest consecrations
 at the tired and bruised yet beautiful
 feet of the dear dear Mother, 328

how they play the truant, how they practise
 the plunderer, the sadist,
 how they grab, maim, use, misuse and abuse,
 but never a grateful nod! 329

Since her ministry began long aeons
 ago, she has been waiting,
 waiting, but her numerous progeny
 have been callous or cruel. 330

And so, friends, sisters, when the fit is on,
 hot tears well up in my eyes,
 my body trembles like an aspen leaf,
 and even prayers fail me!" 331

Silent as a rule, but now Urmila
 said: "Some consanguinity
 I have with the Earth's variegated hues,
 for they are her alphabet. 332

Seven are the rainbow's colours, and yet
 Mother Prakriti's drama
 of continuous efflorescence throws up
 splendidous tints a legion. 333

Never a dull or dead or drear moment;
 the form, content and colour
 play the chameleon tantalising me,
 and winning my heart as well. 334

You know, between long spells of lassitude,
 my mind conjures up visions,
 and I must then gather seeds, leaves, barks, vines
 and manufacture my hues; 335

39 *The Girlhood of Sita*

and soon, as my freak of fancy or leap
of imagination dares,
I mix my paints and play with my brushes
till the Mother smiles once more." 336

Jayanti, one of the company, said:
"While Sita finds in Bhooma
the Mother of the manifestation
and sustainer of all Life, 337

Urmila sees the same Earth as artist
and purveyor of colours,
the excellent goddess of the canvas
who decrees Beauty's Temple. 338

And you Mandavi? and Srutakirti?
a jewel for your 'credo,
for during these impressionable years
you've forged your vocation too." 339

The sprightly outspoken Srutakirti
needed no special prompting:
"Why all this high seriousness? Bhooma
hugs us in a thousand ways: 340

just like the grandmother at home, for whom
nothing is too burdensome,
whose caress is heavenly, who carries
the load of all the mothers. 341

From the most trivial to the high sublime
we have played our partnerships,
and if I tease her she smiles back, and if
I frown, she smiles even more!" 342

As if still struggling with her reticence,
Mandavi spoke succinctly:
"Dear Earth is for me the Supreme Giver,
the Goddess Sakambari. 343

I watch the slow rhythm of the seasons,
and varied the Mother's gifts,
and plentiful ever, had we only
a sense of consecration. 344

Wasting nothing we want nothing; Bhooma
gifts largesse for each season:
there's food for each palette, and there's Beauty
beckoning to us always." 345

“That’s a rare shower of revelation,”
 said Sita excitedly;
 “our homage to Kali, Lakshmi, Bhooma,
 Bhramari, Sakambari!” 346

When, on another occasion, the talk
 took a turn once more towards
 the mystery of Sita’s mystic ties
 with the divine Earth-Mother, 347

she gave answer with a disarming smile:
 “Let’s not be too curious,
 for few things on this fair Earth or beyond
 can be contained by language. 348

What can we know, sisters, trapped as we are
 in the ‘present’, the nexus
 so feeble between the eternities —
 all the past, all the future! 349

We live and die, and live and die again,
 and the whole rhythm of life
 is also the dirge of decay and death,
 and the song of renewal. 350

Now look at the cycle of the seasons,
 and year after year the six
 come and go, and after the rains, new life,
 and flowering, and fruitage. 351

‘Tis said that once during the Earth’s nonage –
 oh millions of years ago! —
 there was no woodland, no semblance of life,
 till the Earth-Mother woke up. 352

And she dreamt dreams, and the Great God above
 hearkened to her ardent cry
 and decreed that the earth would be the home
 of the adventure of Life. 353

There are legends and myths and memories
 of our dear Mother’s saga
 of trial and error and becoming,
 and all the present splendour! 354

There’s the seminal myth of Mother-Earth’s
 pristine daughter – the prime source
 of love and life – being carried away
 by the nether world’s Titan. 355

That meant drought and starvation and defeat
for the hapless hungry ones,
till the redeemer hushed the transgressor,
and flora flourished again. 356

In times of clairvoyant intensity—
although far between and few—
I have had the oppressive sensation
of playing the Daughter's role! 357

Almost a shudder would pass through me then,
and I would feel invaded
by an elemental ocean darkness
and cast down spite of myself. 358

But it would not do to dwell on these things,
for they're nightmare fantasies
and may have no relation whatever
to life's actualities. 359

Still I can't hardly help thinking sometimes
that all this life, these buildings,
the glories of our birth and fostering,
are only the stuff of dreams! 360

But no, a truce to these speculations!
There's the Grace of the Supreme,
and this never fails, though we may fail it;
let the Mother shield us all." 361

Thus would they, the daughters of Videha,
measure their fugitive hours
in light talk or more serious probing;
and so days, weeks, months, years passed. 362

But for the growing aspirant Sita
and her receptive sisters,
all Videha was an academy
with its tonic ambience. • 363

Mithila's high priest, Sage Satananda,
ready always to impart •
instruction, oftentimes engaged Sita
in useful dialectics, 364

and once the chase for Truth was in full swing
it was sometimes uncertain
whether the pupil or the teacher felt
more rewarded in the end. 365

Or the wise and learned Sage would regale
 the sisters with Vedic lore
 redolent of seminal myths and Truths
 and profound symbol-figures, 366

or retell with meticulous detail
 a saga like Savitri's
 rescue of Satyavan the Soul of Truth
 from the fateful noose of Death. 367

There were special occasions too, sessions
 of exhilarating thought,
 when Yajnavalkya and other savants
 of the Spirit were present; 368

and the wise Janaka would then preside,
 and the dialectic would
 rise to heights of dizzy preeminence,
 and the higher Light would pour. 369

And Sita followed with close attention
 Gargi Vachaknavi lead
 many a seasoned Yogi up the slopes
 of sinuous argument. 370

Once, indeed, Gargi went a step too far
 and asked Sage Yajnavalkya
 for the cause of all causes, base of all
 bases, and was admonished: 371

"There's a 'Thus far and no farther', Gargi,
 and the dialectic horse
 cannot pass the last barrier — only
 trip and scuttle the rider. 372

The ultimate Reality, Gargi,
 the root of all, sap of all,
 defies definition, analysis —
 it's what you lose yourself in! 373

Do not seek to storm the last of gate-ways
 seated on your ego's wings;
 rather melt and merge in the Ambience,
 and annul all difference." 374

Janaka himself would, from time to time,
 visit the Hermitages
 around, and in his company, Sita
 would be a silent learner. 375

43 *The Girlhood of Sita*

And from Maitreyi, Gargi and others,
 the eager open-minded
 Maithili would assimilate the art
 of wise worshipful living. 376

In those exclusive haunts of sanctity,
 she heard too of fabulous
 Rishipatnis — Atri's Anasuya,
 Agastya's Lopamudra. 377

Wonderful was this spacious stretch of land,
 thought Sita, with Himavant
 stationed as a perspective of silence
 for the wise woodland dwellers! 378

The integral growth of the Mithilan
 sisters thus went on apace,
 and Sita was the Light among the lights
 and the Grace of all graces. 379

The princesses had their educative
 games and diversions as well,
 for Sita oft played chess with Urmila,
 Mandavi, or her sister. 380

In a little space of black-and-white squares
 the rival armies battled,
 while ingenuity, Rules of the Game
 and Chance strove for victory. 381

And Sita had a fascination for
 the game of Snakes and Ladders,
 and the entire suspense-charged exercise
 seemed a vast education. 382

The ground plan was a complex geography
 of the ethical cosmos,
 ladders and spiralling hill-climbs above,
 snakes and abysses below. 383

Sita felt half-frightened half-edified
 by the naming and ranking
 of the sins and virtues, and the sequent
 punishments and promotions. 384

And for every rise howsoever steep
 there lurked near an abysmal
 fall, and these criss-crossed teasingly, and one
 learnt humility and hope. 385

- In one of the illustrated lay-outs
of the occult universe,
Sita saw spread out in picturesque terms
the dual contingencies. 386
- All the dreaded denizens of the dark
forests were prowling about,
and the sea-monsters were no less eager
to pounce on the unwary. 387
- The long day's journey up the winding crags
oft led up only to jaws
gaping wide that were ready to suck in
the unwary traveller! 388
- The total unpredictability
of the play of chance and change,
of forced ascents, and of precipitous
slips and catastrophic falls! 389
- And again, amid the reign of bleakness,
the first obscure hint of hope,
the breath of new life, the cloud no bigger
than a hand presaging rain! 390
- It was a marvellous education
without tears, for the lessons
seeped within, and seasoned the very cells
and blood-streams of the body. 391
- Sometimes, for a variation, Sita
opted for another kind
of chart, symbolising the soul's journey
through the tunnels to the Light. 392
- The glossy chequer-board of black and white—
passion; malice, ignorance
cheek by jowl with clarity, charity,
radiance—held her rapt gaze, 393
- and she visualised a grim see-saw
between the conflicting poles:
the viperous hells of Desire below,
and the blissful far Heavens. 394
- But Sita felt that the games that humans
played with such dexterity
quite missed the quintessential dimension—
the unseen action of Grace. 395

45 *The Girlhood of Sita*

In the ceaseless flux of phenomenal
 life, where did one draw the line
between the Lord's game and the miasma
 of subjective colouring? 396

She dared to rely on her innocence
 and sovereign femineity,
and she sensed the omnipotence of Grace
 and felt inviolable. 397

Canto 6: What Dreams may Come

There were occasions when Sita was caught
in the quicksands realm between
the restful meadow of deep dreamless sleep
and the waking hours of Day. 398

Images of the feminine psyche—
beauty, power, glamour, love,
compassion, self-surrender, uncanny
expertise in little acts; 399

aye, cunning and dissimulation too,
and pride, passion, prejudice,
self-love, self-division, self-abasement,
all the flowers of folly— 400

these psychic motions assumed human shapes
and took part in tense dramas
of aggrandisements, betrayals, defeats,
and shattering denouements: 401

with such oddities, frights and fantasies
filling the immense spaces
of her dreams, her tender limbs would tremble
as she woke up with a start. 402

But at other times the dream-figures glowed
like the Roses of Heaven,
and ecstasy was piled on ecstasy,
and deep sleep settled on her. 403

She used to compare notes with her sisters
and other close companions,
and although the particulars varied,
the basic questions remained. 404

Why did the mind, Maithili asked herself,
get wholly out of control
the moment the body sought rest, the lids
closed, and the night took over? 405

In what was no more than two or three hours,
she seemed able to traverse
the cosmic stairways, the cyclic roadways,
and all earth, hell and heaven. 406

All was vivid, immediate and stinging,
 more alive than life, more charged
 with precipitancy, more wide-ranging
 in its ramifications. 407

And some few dreams and nightmare sequences
 made recurrence a habit,
 and such sinisterly reiteration
 shook her equanimity. 408

In this aggregation of memory
 heaped up promiscuously,
 three or four stood out boldly on their own
 as if perched on a summit. 409

When was it she dreamt first of Prince Charming,
 no more than a boy it seemed,
 but regal, self-possessed, with shining eyes
 and his hand clasping a bow? 410

Then there was the fatalistic rebuff,
 the tempting offer of fruit,—
 and the sudden withdrawal, followed by
 the thrusting of the wormwood. 411

And the fellowship of hermitresses!
 Schooled in high austerity
 they walked the steep path of self-mastery
 and attained a divine calm. 412

She encountered, too, Prakriti's puzzles:
 her wayward moods and musings,
 now wreathed in smiles, now red in tooth and claw,
 now delight, and danger next; 413

the friendliness of mountains, rivers, trees,
 the hooded swaying cobra;
 the lure of swans in lotus-ponds, the love
 of does, fawns, sparrows, peacocks! 414

On a wintry night, however, she had
 the petrifying vision
 of a bird of paradise on a tree
 reached by the hydra-headed. 415

Partly frightened, partly fascinated,
 the dove held the sly serpent
 at bay, while its hood swayed entrancingly
 till it swooped upon the bird. 416

As if stung by a vicious scorpion,
 Sita woke up with a scream,
 and 'twas some time before she realised
 she had been merely dreaming. 417

In her cushioned comfortable chamber
 in great Janaka's mansion,
 even a Mithilan winter was warm,
 yet she shivered in terror. 418

Although sleep eluded her for the rest
 of the long lingering night,
 the patience and peace of the Earth-mother
 cast a cloak of protection. 419

There was no repetition of this dream,
 but its indelible stamp
 burnt deep into her waking consciousness
 and clouded her sunniness. 420

There was a muddling of her days and nights,
 the real and surreal
 seemed to delight in playing hide and seek,
 and Sita hungered for light. 421

With her father's permission and blessings,
 Sita chose a bright morning
 and pilgrimaged to the forest dwelling
 of Rishi Yajnavalkya. 422

After rendering obeisance to him
 and the assembled wise ones,
 Sita found her way to Maitreyi's cell
 and fell prostrate at her feet. 423

The Rishi's spouse, transfigured with surprise
 bent down and gathered Sita
 in her arms, and seating her on the couch
 sprayed motherly affection. 424

"What ails you my child?" she asked with concern;
 "I can see that a shadow
 lies sprawled across the sun-lit path ahead,
 like a fallen roadside tree. 425

It's not wise to hug such phantoms, lest they
 reduce the heart to cinders;
 tell me, my child, what causes this unease,
 what forebodings assail you?" 426

49 *What Dreams may Come*

Thus encouraged, Sita made a clean breast
of her apprehensions, and
recalling her diverse dream-sequences
sought reassuring answers: 427

“Mother Maitreyi, how may I relate
the way my mind feels involved
in these disturbing fantasias of dreams
with my world of waking life? 428

Dreams sometimes seem more vivid, and nightmares
more compellingly awesome,
than the fair and foul of everyday life:
but true and false, which is which? 429

I dream of good and evil, and live my
daily life: what’s the nexus
between? and are these dreams but shadows cast
by the crawl of the future?” 430

For a while Maitreyi held Maithili
in an intent gaze, as if
reading the closed book of her mind, the writ
prospective of her future. 431

Her eyes could see what was hid from others,
she was shocked by what she saw,
but presently, beyonding the beyond,
she felt amply reassured. 432

With a smile she took Sita’s hands in hers,
and thus forging full rapport,
Maitreyi said: “Ah, you’re raising questions
too profound for your young years. 433

But you’re a woman apart, Vaidehi,
and you have the right to probe
this intriguing problem: the link between
the Real and Unreal. 434

Life’s like a dream intangible sometimes,
and dreams oft hold us in thrall
and give us the kick of the larger life—
and there are the gradations. 435

Perhaps, then, the Real is unreal,
the unreal is Real?
Nay more: the One alone remains joining
the Real and unreal. 436

But hardly a few, the richly endowed,
 reach this dizzy plenitude
 of knowing by Being, of uniting
 in Agni's fusional blaze. 437

For the many, it's as revelation
 and faith, and not as reason,
 that this Truth of Divine omnipresence
 must be received and cherished. 438

It's obvious, Sita, you and I sit
 and talk, and there are others,
 in regions distant or near, aye, millions,
 millions, each of them alive! 439

And yet, surely, without a cohesive
 principle that unites all
 and keeps this circus going, we'd all have
 gone up in smoke long ago. 440

I'm here, and you're there, and we're together,
 and this will suffer no change
 when you've gone back to Janaka's palace,
 and I remain where I am. 441

Don't our eyes peer into the far distance?
 Our ears hearken to music,
 maybe from the spheres; our hands by their feel
 clasp the material world. 442

A still more elusive power is Mind,
 and its range is infinite,
 from the centre to the circumference;
 and there's the Soul, above all! 443

But Sita, between what we are and what
 we are intended to be,
 falls alas the shadow of ignorance,
 and distortions emanate. 444

Just as there's an awakening from sleep,
 you shake off ignorance too
 and wake up from the nightmare existence
 that's our everyday scaffold. 445

And only those elect realised souls
 who have achieved, and rest in,
 this total wakefulness of body, mind
 and soul, are the truly wise. 446

They live their separate lives, but only
as water-drops in a pool;
they split apart, and they merge, and there's no
fragmentation of the mind. 447

If such a Mahatma, like Vasishta,
like Agastya, or his wife
Lopamudra, the fabulous Atri,
or his spouse, Anasuya: 448

if such Yogins are seized with a problem,
their vision sweeps the contours
of space and time—here to eternity—
and finds the relevant key. 449

It's given to them alone to see through
the veneer of difference
and to speed beyond the dualities
and dissolve in the silence. 450

As for the rest, grovelling as they do
in grooves of varied mileage
that are filled with the densest inconscience,
their surmises are faulty. 451

Not that the cosmos is a fake—only
our readings are often false,
for we're prone to forge the wrong connections
and draw the sham conclusions. 452

I don't think, dear Sita, you should worry
or spend restless nights and days
brooding over these sly visitations
and nurturing disquiet." 453

But Sita, no doubt feeling instructed,
knew that the Tapasvini
had shirked the crucial personal problem,
and so gently pressed again: 454

"Sweet Mother, I can see the anxiety,
love, concern behind your words;
I'm immature, I know, I'm at the foot
of the Stair of Yoga still. 455

But Mother, you're one of the elect too,
and can you not read my dreams—
the ones I cited—and tell me truly
if I have reason to fear." 456

Maitreyi saw there was no evading,
 no slurring, of Vaidehi's
 portentous question; and meeting her eyes
 again, spoke straight to her heart: 457

"You don't know, my child, the Person you are:
 a veiled divinity shapes
 infallibly this your terrestrial life:
 where, then, is the need for fear? 458

All you witnessed in your dream-sequences
 are doubtless down to the earth,
 for since a soul immune from flaw like yours
 can traffick in no falsehood, 459

yes, even the dreams you see must project
 the substance of Truth alone,
 and you're being prepared unconsciously
 for the still unborn future. 460

This is the central paradox, Sita,
 the world is one *and* many,
 and all fragmentation, contradiction
 and self-division are false. 461

But only the few fully enlightened
 know all the mediate steps,
 the intricate causal filiations
 and date of the journey's end. 462

These visitations and intimations,
 O Maithili, that infest
 the dim corridors of the unconscious
 play their own messenger-roles. 463

Life's no series of monotonous notes,
 for the magician-artiste
 varies the stops and sweeps o'er the octaves
 and makes entrancing music. 464

A little while, my child, and you'll be hailed
 a rare phantom of delight;
 and you'll win what you ardently desire
 and the world will smile on you. 465

And a little while after, you may have
 to quali' the bitter chalice,
 endure what seems eternal night, and win
 and lose, and win all again. 466

But Sita, stationed as I see you are
on the Ground of all Being,
although yourself unaware at present,
the Mother's Grace will shield you." 467

Just then her sister Kātyāyani came
and was in supreme rapture
seeing Sita in a trance of self-poise
seated by Maitreyi's side. 468

"What a surprise and joy, O Maithili,"
she said with animation;
"you've grown in the holiness of beauty
prefacing the bride to be!" 469

And she hugged Sita with a heartiness
and benevolence of love
that dispelled at once the lingering clouds
of anxious speculation. 470

Thus did the coming of Katyayani
galvanise of a sudden
the atmosphere of Maitreyi's chamber
with an infectious sunshine. 471

There were smiles all round, and queries followed
queries, and Sita was charmed,
the dull load on her mind slipped like a cloak,
and she was seraph-like free. 472

She responded to Katyayani's probes
without reserve, and they smiled
understandingly, and Maitreyi felt
inly relieved and happy. 473

Having now made obeisance to the two
Rishipatnis and received
their blessings, Maithili took leave of them
and returned to the palace. 474

Canto 7: Initiation

For Sita, as for her sisters, the years
of their girlhood were indeed
a seed-time of unceasing unfoldment
and growth within and without. 475

With a fair balance of austerities
and freedoms, aspirations
and fulfilments, there was a fusing
of music and gymnastic. 476

Besides Yajnavalkya's, many other
Ashramas too lay scattered
in Videha's countryside, essaying
variety in ends and means; 477

and Maitreyi's counselling, the image
of Gargi, the rich flavour
of the debates, all inspired Maithili
to hanker after that life. 478

Gargi herself had often marked Sita
sitting aloof and absorbed
with a look of wondrous comprehension
ranging from earth to heaven. 479

Now whenever Maithili approached her
for enlightenment, Gargi
gave her time freely, and between them grew
a mature understanding. 480

For Sita's unblemished mind, heart and soul,
the scintillating Gargi
with her probing questions and intuitive
canters of comprehension, 481

the Vachaknavi was like one apart,
a rare mystic, but teaming
with a thinker whose mind tore through the veils
of falsehood and reached the Truth. 482

In some of the private sessions she had
with the Mithilan quartet,
Gargi was struck by their sincerity
and their psychic openness. 483

Once she took the princesses to what seemed
an exclusive Mandala
ensconced amidst the luxuriant growth
of the Videhan uplands. 484

With Janaka's delighted approval
the sisters sojourned a while
exposing themselves to the Mandala's
integrated way of life. 485

The inmates were rather a motley, and
hailed from the four quarters, and
engaged in various kinds of work, and
laboured towards perfection. 486

The children in the school or gymnasium,
the Karma Yogis on their
rounds, the exemplars of askesis poised
in self-illumination: 487

the love-intoxicated, their faces
aglow with adoration,
hymning ineluctable melodies
electrifying the air: 488

and the magnificent Grove attracting
in the evenings the entire
community for congregational
still-sitting and surrender: 489

the sainted Mother of the Mandala
would then appear in their midst,
a glory of golden apocalypse,
a column of effulgence. 490

The minutes sped on, and a few hundred
ardours and aspirations
lost their obtrusive angularities
and became a living soul. 491

Who was it, that marvellous catalyst
of change and transformation,
whose smile had the power to redeem all
from their crass mortality? 492

Evening after evening, as the sittings
ran their course, Maithili felt
lifted to higher and still higher states
of puissance of consciousness. 493

Caught in the steady gaze and serene smile
of the presiding Mother,
Sita saw the clouds of falsehood recede
and felt bathed in sudden light. 494

For Sita, as for the other monads
that made the congregation,
the immersion and the dissolution
in the vast seagreen oneness, 495

and their re-emergence as purified
crystal soul-universes
became the infallible *tapasya*
of self-finding and self-growth. 496

But fallen on gravel or thorns, relapse
was easy, and the see-saw
between the opposing pulls could become
a life-time's trial of strength. 497

Yet, undaunted, the several inmates
sedulously strained after
self-mastery, and looked to the Mother
to steer them through their narrows. 498

Sita had reverent observant eyes
and she was the observed too,
and the Mithilan sisters mixed freely
with the whole community. 499

What struck Maithili with peculiar force
was the nature of the bond
that held such a diversity of men,
women, children together. 500

'Twas a microcosm, in fact, of the world
entire, and comprised loners,
householders with their families, hermits,
ecstatics, hermitresses. 501

But everyone — child, adult, the elect —
relied on his psychic link
with the one beloved Mother of all,
like the wheel's spokes and the hub. 502

All ties and labels — father, mother, son,
daughter, husband, wife, comrade —
were feeble ancillaries, deriving
only from the link Divine. 503

The inmates hardly seemed to mind the kind
of work they did, — minuscule,
menial or monotonous, — for all ranked
the same in the Mother's eyes. 504

The invisible atom, equally
with the distant galaxies,
made the grand orchestrated symphony
of the Hymn of Existence. 505

The day came at last when Gargi arranged
for Sita to be received
by the Mother of all Radiances
in her own Sanctuary. 506

'Twas a bare small retreat, and there behind
the high-backed chair she sat in
the backgrounding walls were serenely blue,
as though the sky was around. 507

Sita had known the feel of the power
of that frail figure's Presence
in the meditative evening sessions
of the last several days: 508

and now, this meeting was like the river
homing to the sea, for all
contours of difference faded away,
and a deep peace descended. 509

Sita fell almost in a leap before
the seat of that Effulgence,
and as she made obeisance, the Mother
gave a transfiguring smile. 510

Then gathering and seating the prostrate
Sita before her, she gazed
long at the trembling Maithili, as if
reading her life like a book. 511

It was like a trance of exploration,
for those liquid eyes of light
seemed to respond to sharp alternations
and flickered accordingly. 512

Wasn't she seeing farther and deeper than
she had intended at first?
Her face was grey and luminous by turns,
and a shudder passed through her. 513

Her right palm fondly touched Sita's bent head
in a gesture of blessing,
her hands stroked the arms, her eyes were gentle,
and she spoke as one concerned: 514

"Sita, I've watched you in the still-sitting
sessions, and young as you are,
Videhan Janaka's Light surrounds you
as a protective armour. 515

The Yogi who founded this Ashrama
had a clear sense of mission,
and I came driven by an afflatus
and found in him my Godhead. 516

You've seen, Sita, this self-regulated
community revolving,
like the earth's diurnal round by Nature's
laws and quiet compulsions. 517

'Tis some years now since He chose to withdraw,
and I've seen the Ashrama
put forth wings of consciousness ready for
a flight into the future. 518

But Sita, I know that the agenda
for change and transformation
of this errant earth-life to the Divine
may take many a life-time. 519

But seeing you in your incandescent
purity and perfection
of feminine beauty, I dare again
to dream of the Golden Age." 520

Once more she gazed deep into Sita's eyes,
saw a darkness intervene,
and there was Sun-splendour again chasing
the crowding shadows away. 521

"Sita, I seem to see more than I should,"
she said as if haltingly;
"no mere princess you, but a parable
of sublime necessity. 522

O my darling immaculate Earth-born,
Mother Madhavi's daughter!
a sudden blaze of glory reveals all,
O my marvel Maithili! 523

I see the deceptive scales slip and fall,
the separative cages
crumble and melt and vanish into air:
myself, myself am Sita! 524

Should you ever be seized with helplessness,
think of me, for I take charge
of all, all whom I may have seen even
for a mere fleeting second! 525

When danger in the future assails you,
fear not but look deep within
and seek -- tearing through all barrier veils --
the invulnerable You. 526

I know you have come missioned to this earth,
and must run the whole gamut
between the termini of Light and Dark,
and yet exceed them as well. 527

Sita, Sita, I dare not speak further,
for I see blanks and blotches
on the luminous spread of the Sun-rays,
but the Grace will never fail." 528

And with another hug and ritual
motion of benediction,
the Mother gave the initiation smile
and let Maithili withdraw. 529

Joining her sisters after her moment
of maturity in Truth,
Sita with the light of her new knowledge
fraternised without speaking. 530

A new certitude marked Sita's movements
and formulations of speech,
and this was reflected in Urmila,
Mandavi, Srutakirti. 531

Thus came about the mystic inductions,
and solicitous Gargi
helped them take leave of the community
with universal goodwill. 532

Canto 8: The Dome of Holiness

On her return to Mithila, Sita
 had an insightful session
with her father, and he could now see her
 with a new understanding. 533

“A light is on your face, Sita,” he said,
 “and I’m happy and alarmed
at once, for such uncommon gifts of Grace
 come attended with perils. 534

But she whose wings of glory you have seen,
 the air you’ve breathed, the vouchsafed
vision and veil of protection, these will
 help you safely to come through. 535

Now Sita, I’ll ask Gargi to take you
 to another Ashrama
set in the lower Himalayan range
 like a pearl amid sapphires. 536

The High Priestess, the aged prophetess
 of the multi-splendoured Dome,
has been the inspiration of millions,
 an Aditi for us all.” 537

And the day came when Gargi and Sita —
 ’twas only Sita this time —
steered towards the Himalayan foothills
 and made for the Mandala. 538

Nature in her native extravagance,
 the run and riot of life
and beauty, the variegated richness,
 o’erpowered Sita at once. 539

It was half-hidden behind a margin
 of luxurious *sal* trees,
and the ochre-clad guardian of the gate
 gave them ready admission. 540

There opened before them divers clusters
 of cottages small and big,
and rising imperious from their midst,
 the great Dome of Holiness. 541

An impressive breath-taking edifice
 reared upon a high platform,
 a granite polyhedronic marvel
 with terrace upon terrace: 542

a series of concentric formations,
 smaller yet smaller they rose
 higher and higher, and all supporting
 the dizzy ultimate Dome: 543

a many-tiered and orchestrated
 marvel of aspiration
 in heady stairways of ascent towards
 the teasing, beckoning, top. 544

On a closer scrutiny of the walls
 and the sustaining coloumns,
 Sita was struck by the telling sequence
 of exquisite bas-reliefs, 545

and she measured her present perceptions
 with her earlier insights,
 and when she felt confused, there was Gargi
 to read the implied message. 546

“This dream-fabric or fantasy, Sita,”
 Gargi explained, “is far more
 than an architectural feat: call it,
 rather, a *mantra* in stone! 547

When you hold yourself in stillness serene,
 something does happen to you,
 and you feel lifted out of your present
 and drawn towards the apex. 548

I'll now take you to Devi Mānasi
 the throned Priestess of the place,
 and she may raise you, if she likes, to high
 plateaus of puissance and light.” 549

Led by Gargi, the subdued Maithili
 found the way to the cavern
 in the interior space of the Dome,
 and they offered obeisance. 550

Raising her eyes as she rose, Sita saw
 a Power a Radiance,
 something ageless, sexless, a beyonding
 of human suppositions. 551

Who was it, the all-sufficing Presence,
 golden the glow on the face,
 a smile that seemed to chase all fear away,
 and eyes that spoke compassion? 552

Sita felt the throb of a tremendous
 exhilaration and joy,
 and 'twas as though she was held in a trance
 of total identity. 553

"My child," said Mother Manasi softly,
 having gazed long at Sita
 as if reading all past, present, future
 in an integrated sweep; 554

"my dear child, Sita, O unique Earth-born
 of sanctified Mithila;
 and Gargi Vachaknavi, my daughter;
 I give you both my blessings. 555

Sita, your cherubic innocent eyes
 seem yet to speak the language
 of scripture, fusing thought-spans and sound-waves
 like a melody unstruck. 556

Gargi has done wisely to bring you here,
 for I shall now induct you
 into the mystique and allegory
 of this Dome of Holiness." 557

And she rose by an effort of sheer will
 taking Sita by the hand,
 and led with slow measured steps, with Gargi
 keeping close as she followed. 558

"Sita", said the Priestess as they walked on,
 "these labyrinthine pathways,
 like the body's blood-streams, make a complex
 self-sustaining unity. 559

Glory be to the Architect who reared
 this fantasy in granite,
 for it is a call to aspiration
 and sure realisation." 560

By now they had reached, after a winding
 bout of dovetailed passages,
 a sudden space of calm intensity
 that opened up all around. 561

“Ah here we are,” said Mother Manasi,
 “this might be the very hub
 of the universe of forms and functions,
 the trembling heart of the whole. 562

Now Sita, close your eyes for a minute
 in a meditative stance,
 and still poised in silence, open your eyes
 to the soul’s deeper seeing.” 563

A moment extracted from the ceaseless
 movement of Time eternal,
 and in that elected moment of time,
 yes, time itself ceased to be. 564

Sita was weighted with no wants, worries,
 specific expectations;
 there were no intruding distractions, and
 she was ready to receive. 565

Everything was transparent everywhere:
 she gazed above and below,
 she looked around in wonder and surmise,
 she was in and out at once. 566

The same serene diminishing circles,
 the same tiered terraces,
 the same poly-faceted ensembles
 confronted her everywhere. 567

Sita stole a quick glance at the Priestess
 who seemed bathed in an aura
 unearthly, and her answering smile gave
 the needed approbation. 568

Maithili’s eyes of sharpened consciousness
 fanned out once more, and she saw
 in a single burst of revelation
 the wordless stupendous Truth. 569

In the depths she saw the heights, in the dark
 the blinding Light, in the Dome
 the stair of terraces, and everything
 seemed mirrored in everything. 570

Lit by a power of animation
 out of the ordinary,
 Sita’s vision seemed suddenly gifted
 with an occult dimension, 571

she saw with a plenary perception
 the merging of the big and small,
 the dissolution of categories
 and the crystalline oneness. 572

The within and without universes
 became unseverable,
 and she saw the Tree in the seed, the Sun
 in the nethermost darkness. 573

And the more she gazed, her consciousness grew
 new wings of discovery,
 and Manasi, Gargi, and herself too—
 all in one and one in all. 574

Now suddenly, within a split-second,
 the great vision ambrosial
 withdrew, and dazed by the disappearance
 Sita turned to the Mother. 575

Feeling fulfilled and happy, Manasi
 held the trembling Sita close,
 and looking her straight while wiping the tears,
 she spoke as a mother would: 576

“Sita, I see you feel overpowered
 having now stolen a glimpse
 into a tunnel in the depths of God
 where the Dark is Light indeed. 577

I thought it proper you should be exposed
 to this kaleidoscopic
 theatre of forms where all the roles change
 and all identities fuse. 578

It's like the reckless versatility
 of dreams, so much happening
 in so little time, and all coalescing,
 dissolving, disappearing. 579

Out of the self-same primordial essence,
 like jewellery out of gold,
 the multitudinous phenomena
 renew and spin out themselves. 580

But Sita, there's also the key or clue
 to the constant theatre
 and its play of varieties,—and seize it,
 and nothing can assail you! 581

You have seen the phantasmagoria
of forms, functions, processes,
the mysteries of interdependence
and deep inter-involvement. 582

One moment, and the spendthrift play is on;
and another, the actors
are but foam-stuff, dream-struff, leaving nothing
but ghost memories behind. 583

You've seen, Sita, the varied terraces,
the rising and the falling,
the mystical mathematics of Heaven
that keep them all together. 584

But remember, there's the infallible
soul-key, the clue to the rest;
and the soul is itself, the unique You
and the Infinite as well. 585

It may be, with a destiny like yours,
you may have to face trials
far beyond the range of the average:
that's why this education. 586

In this unceasing movement of Time —
in this cosmic living space —
remember, the centre is everywhere,
the circumference nowhere. 587

In times of terrific perplexity,
fear not but dive deep within,
look for the hub, the prime source of it all,
and you'll be sovereignly free." 588

Then Devi Manasi laid her right palm
on Sita's head, and pronounced
benedictions suitable to that time
of germinating future. 589

Sita rose, both exhausted and happy,
and Gargi, having exchanged
wordless thoughts with the High Priestess, went back
with Maithili to their cell. 590

Sita's subjective space experienced
a permanent charge of Light,
and she knew that a qualitative change
had come about in her life. 591

For a few more days, Sita and Gargi
tarried in the Ahsrama
fraternising and imbibing the peace—
then went back to Mithila.

Canto 9: **Destiny Unfolding**

- Back in the spacious halls of the palace
and the gardens and arbours,
Sita mingled with her sisters once more
and shared their games and pastimes. 593
- She was dear smiling Maithili again,
ready for the quirks of chance
and change, for serious discourse, and for
agile feats of mind or limb. 594
- Sita and her playmates would sometimes stray,
in their search for novelty,
into the remoter segments and nooks
of the sprawling palace grounds. 595
- On one occasion, the girls were chasing
a fugitive ball bandied
about with a resourceful abandon
till it seemed to disappear. 596
- Sleuthing after it, they saw it lying
snug under an eight-wheeled box
of colossal proportions at the far
end of a long gallery. 597
- Drawing near in her native innocence,
Sita now took a close look,
raised the box a little with her left hand,
while the right rescued the ball. 598
- Happening to come just then, Janaka
was o'ertaken by surprise
and cast on his beloved child a glance
of gloried recognition. 599
- While the girls presently made themselves scarce,
Janaka became wistful,
recalled the mystery of Sita's birth,
and marvelled at her veiled might. 600
- Returning to his room of seclusion
he relapsed into a trance
and viewed the prospective developments
in a comprehensive sweep. 601

He recalled how, after a commotion
 in the heavens, great Shiva
 had let his enormous Bow lie in trust
 in King Devarata's care. 602

Janaka had inherited the Bow
 from his hoary ancestor,
 for it had lain there for generations
 in Mithila's eight-wheeled box. 603

When, in the flush of adolescent dawn,
 Sita was the cynosure
 of all eyes and filled the lords of the land
 with a longing for her hand, 604

her father, the King, was vastly worried,
 for she was not like others,
 she was the unique Earth-born, and her Lord
 should worthily team with her. 605

Having now stolen a glimpse of her strength—
 prodigious if unconscious—
 Janaka resolved her bride-price would be
 the stringing of the great Bow 606

In the coming months some ambitious few
 made a dash to Mithila,
 but none of them, for all their known prowess,
 could even lift Shiva's Bow. 607

The King of the Videhas grew anxious
 again, for eligible
 ardent suitors seemed to be scared away
 by the formidable Bow. 608

Besides, every passing day saw Sita
 radiant with a new glow,
 and her beauty and maiden innocence
 sparked a holiness as well. 609

Some few inferred a screened divinity,
 an elemental Shakti,
 a cleansing power of incandescence,
 and felt awed, and retreated. 610

For her friends, and for the common people,
 however, Sita was still
 the dear and familiar Earth-born maiden,
 the incomparable one. 611

She mingled in the citizen's pastimes,
 she exchanged subtle questions
 with the savants of the Spirit, and oft
 felt lost in the Infinite. 612

Sometimes gazing at the star-splendoured sky
 Sita went into a trance,
 and 'twas as though her mystic extension
 stretched out for the universe. 613

All Time past melted into Time future,
 and the notional present
 embraced the asymptotic termini;
 and Sita was all the worlds! 614

And yet she could of a sudden relax,
 contain her immensities,
 and show to everyday earth the image
 of girlish play and laughter. 615

Like the Bow of Shiva that at once lured
 by its beauty of repose
 in the eight-wheeled box, and scared all by its
 terror-striking heaviness, 616

Maithili the Earth-born too, Janaka's
 darling daughter, attracted
 suitors, and also filled them with the awe
 of the unattainable 617

A double blessing was a double test,
 and pondering things deeply
 Janaka resolved he would initiate
 a pertinent Sacrifice. 618

Sage Satananda, Mithila's High Priest,
 made the traditional moves,
 and the word travelled fast, and anchorites
 started assembling in force. 619

Mithila was agog with excitement,
 and all the population
 felt involved in the ancient ritual,
 and expectations ran high. 620

Sita felt drawn to the selected site,
 a new beauty and ardour
 touched her limbs, and her commonest gestures
 seemed charged with a divine glow. 621

With Urmila, Mandavi and others,
 Sita followed the progress
 of the Sacrifice with its swelling chants
 and oblations in the fire. 622

All roads seemed to converge on Mithila,
 and Sita was fed by friends
 with news of all the latest arrivals,
 and of fresh developments. 623

In controlled excitement the young Princess
 heard of the coming of Kings,
 Rishis with a legendary renown,
 and warriors of repute. 624

Someone muttered the word 'Visvamitra'
 in hushed accents, and Sita
 pricked her ears and soon after, Mandavi
 brought the most astounding news. 625

She had had it second-hand, yet there was
 the ring of resounding truth:
 the news concerned the almost mythical
 Ahalya, Gautama's spouse. 626

Sita's subtler consciousness registered
 a hint of recognition:
 hadn't the hapless Ahalya been condemned
 to a sterile existence? 627

Since her passage from the safe hither shore
 of bright innocence, across
 the foam-crests of adolescence, towards
 the coasts of Experience, 628

Sita had sometimes debated within
 on the vagaries of gods,
 demons and men, and found herself perplexed
 by the ways of Providence. 629

If she was to believe Mandavi's news —
 Ahalya's resurrection —
 it was an apocalyptic moment
 scissored out of linear Time. 630

Gods and demons seemed to persist in their
 respective perversities
 or egoisms — no repentance, no change,
 no transformation for them! 631

Sita had heard that Indra, 'god of gods'
 as he was brazenly known,
 author of many an aberration,
 had shown no remorse at all. 632

'Twas left to Ahalya alone, first-born
 of the Feminine, frail, flawed,
 human, and more sinned against than sinning,
 to pay for her transgression! 633

And Sita wondered whether Ahalya,
 now transfigured in rebirth,
 wasn't the chaster and holier paragon
 excelling the gods themselves? 634

Now came running to Sita her sisters
 Urmila, Srutakirti;
 and they seemed hardly able to contain
 their thrilled wonderment and joy. 635

They had heard that, with the Rishi, had come
 a youthful warrior Prince
 and his intent younger brother matching
 the elder to perfection. 636

These were the famed Rama and Lakshmana,
 the inseparable ones
 and darling sons of Ayodhya's monarch,
 the righteous Dasaratha. 637

Guided by Visvamitra, Rama had
 entered the deserted hut,
 and now there rose before him all at once
 a woman unparalleled. 638

This was Ahalya, bright like the full Moon
 but obscured by fog and cloud,
 or like the Sun reflected in a lake,
 or a Flame filmed by the smoke. 639

She had eked out her miserable life
 unseen by the madding world;
 penance was the hapless Ahalya's name,
 a legend in her own life! 640

Rama's coming had marked the happy end
 of her existential death,
 and as the young Princes made obeisance
 she offered welcome to all. 641

Out of the obscurity of the past
 and the years of penitence,
 she was now risen as a Radiance
 for all the ages to come. 642

Her sainted husband, Rishi Gautama,
 returning as foreordained,
 there was witnessed the reaffirmation
 of the ancient verities. 643

And with benedictions from Gautama
 and the fire-proof Ahalya,
 the Princes along with Visvamitra
 were set towards Mithila. 644

This news floated like a breath of fresh air
 and keyed up expectancy,
 but Sita retreated to her inner
 stillness, and waited on Grace. 645

And, sure enough, there was a holy hush
 in the Yaga pavilion;
 royalty and sanctity were alert,
 and Time itself seemed to pause. 646

Commanding from their vantage seats a view
 of the consecrated ground,
 Sita and her sisters, all attention,
 watched the developing scene. 647

While the orchestrated diapason
 of the hoary Vedic chants
 charged the air with a new intensity,
 the oblations continued. 648

There was now a flutter near Janaka,
 he suddenly rose, and walked
 with Sage Satananda to the arched gate
 of the sacrificial grounds. 649

Janaka received the Brahma Rishi
 with all due ceremony,
 and begged him to join the other sages
 in the spacious pavilion. 650

The Yāg : would conclude in ten days' time,
 and the King begged Kausika
 Visvamitra to stay on till the end
 and see the proceedings through. 651

- Besides, the King made proper inquiries
about the gallant Princes,
and the great Rishi gave a recital
of his wards' antecedents, 652
- their marvellous feats of arms in defence
of his own Siddhashrama,
and of their compelling desire to see
the famous Bow of Shiva. 653
- Suddenly awakened to a deeper
dream of hope in the buried
unconscious, Satananda turned his eyes
from the youths to Kausika, 654
- and asked with a tremor of anxiety
whether Rama had in fact
visited Ahalya's sick Ashrama
and redeemed her from the past. 655
- And Visvamisra pointedly remarked
that what needed to be done
was done indeed, and reunited were
Ahalya and Gautama. 656
- Satananda, as also Janaka,
heaved a sigh of gratitude,
and 'twas like the auspicious beginning
of a series of new times. 657
- And now they all made their way to the vast
sacrificial pavilion;
Janaka led the hallowed Kausika,
and every one was alert. 658
- That surely was the great Visvamisra,
and with him were the Princes.
boyant, boyish and majestic at once,
and more godlike than human. 659
- Janaka and Satananda guided
the guests extraordinary,
and helped the three to appropriate seats
near the pavilion centre. 660
- The assembled multitude craned their necks
or strained their eyes in the hope
they could locate the august Eminence
and snap the beautiful pair. 661

The same youthful, almost boyish, archer
 with the lure of sapphire blue
 who had haunted her lately in her dreams,
 now paired with his fair brother! 662

This was beyond all anticipation,
 surmise or coincidence;
 and Maithili recalled Maitreyi's words,
 and sensed coming fulfilment. 663

For Sita, 'twas thus an instantaneous
 canter of recognition:
 wasn't Visvamitra the Grace paraclete,
 and Rama the ordained goal? 664

Perhaps, she mused, Rama's wandering eyes,
 as they swept the space across,
 sought her alone, and at last happily
 rested in deep contentment! 665

It was a moment prefigured, unique,
 when two infinities met
 and felt in their reservoir of Spirit
 their two-in-one destiny. 666

Rama carried with him still the aura
 of Ahalya's askesis,
 for her penitence had transfigured her
 as Beauty of Holiness. 667

But Sita's was Beauty of innocence,
 freshness, self-sufficiency,
 the perfect fusion of all perfections,
 the exemplum feminine. 668

Urmila too, and the cousin sisters,
 as they followed Sita's gaze,
 felt a nameless ineffable flutter,
 and were charged with excitement. 669

After a while, when the ritual thrust
 of the sacrificial climb
 had attained the prescribed pause for the day
 and the oblations ended, 670

the young Princes, Rama and Lakshmana,
 and all the congregation
 were treated by the wise Satananda
 to Kausika's history. 671

It was to be verily a discourse
on the slow evolution
of the sovereignty of true *Brahmatēj*,
and the crowning victory. 672

Addressing Rama with an openness
of wonder and gratitude,
Satananda traced the vicissitudes
of the spiralling ascent. 673

Coming in Kusa's royal line of Kings,
Visvamitra was to clash
with Vasishta the preeminent Sage
in his Ashrama domain. 674

The King asked for Vasishta's Sabala,
the divine cow of plenty,
and denied his wish, resorted to force,
and was totally rebuffed. 675

In this elemental issue between
κshatraiēj and *Brahmatēj*—
the King's brute-force and the Rishi's soul-force—
the former knuckled under. 676

In utter chagrin, Visvamitra turned
to severe austerities,
now in the South, then in the West, anon
in the North, last in the East. 677

Again and again, while the upward thrust
of his intense askesis
won acclaim progressively as Rishi,
King-Rishi and Great-Rishi, 678

still from time to time, his native goodness,
spurts of generosity,
pity or anger, his human instincts
and impulses, would undo 679

the arduous achievements of *tapas*,
and all had to be begun
once more, with an increased intensity
compelling admiration. 680

First he risked all the fruits of his *tapas*
by espousing Trisanku's
mad desire for bodily ascension
to the region of the gods. 681

Rejected by Indra, Trisanku fell,
 but being held in mid-sky,
 the Rishi willed an intermediate
 world as surrogate heaven. 682

From the South, Visvamitra now shifted
 to Pushkara in the West,
 and during his rigorous askesis
 came another call for help. 683

Rejected by father and mother both,
 Sunahshepa, Richika's
 middle son, appealed to Visvamitra
 who found the means to save him. 684

Later, while still engaged in askesis,
 Visvamitra chanced to see
 the nymph Menaka bathe in the river —
 like lightning among the clouds! 685

Stricken with instant love, Visvamitra
 asked Menaka to abide
 with him, and a run of ten years flew past
 like a single day and night. 686

Awakening from his infatuation,
 he spoke kindly and bade her
 adieu, and went to the North to resume
 his ardent austerities. 687

His hard-won spiritual eminence
 provoked Indra's jealousy,
 and he asked the nymph, Rumbha, to distract
 Kausika from his *tapas*. 688

But the Rishi saw through the strategem,
 and in anger cursed Rumbha
 to a petrified non-life for some years,
 and himself moved to the East. 689

There at long last, in the high plenitude
 of his silent askesis,
 the gods — and Vasishtha himself — hailed him
 Brahma-Rishi for all time. 690

Janaka and the gathered ascetics,
 Rama and Lakshmana, and
 Sita and her sisters, all intently
 heard the epic narrative, 691

and matchless was their awed admiration
for the great King self-transformed
into the exemplar of anchorites,
the incarnate of penance. 692

Now Janaka marvelled at Kausika's
chequered yet inspiring life,
and invited the young Princes to view
at dawn the Bow of Shiva. 693

Canto 10: **The Bride-Price of Valour**

Returning to the palace interior,
Sita and her companions
talked far, far into the night, recalling
events, and speculating. 694

One or another had information
ancillary to the theme
of the young Princes being invited
to have a look at the Bow. 695

Would the elder of the heroic youths,
Rama the strong-limbed and fair,
make bold — not content with the mere seeing —
to string the great Bow as well? 696

And suppose Rama succeeded indeed,
what then? what then? — and their looks
converged to where Sita sat silently
with an inscrutable look. 697

It was no matter to make light about,
and everyone was concerned:
some wondered, though, whether the boyish Prince
could lift so heavy a Bow. 698

Others more knowledgeable — for they had
gathered the most amazing
news — held the firm opinion that Rama
would certainly make the grade. 699

One of the group was an inveterate
news-gatherer, and somehow
knew everybody, and knew everything;
she now shook her head sagely: 700

“Ah you don’t know!” she said intriguingly;
“be not misled by seeming;
Raraa isn’t the sweet innocent-at-arms
you’ve all taken him to be. 701

I was told by my father that Rama
and his brother, Lakshmana,
have learnt from Visvamitra the Adept
all the arts and science of war. 702

It's even bruited abroad that Rama
 with a single deadly dart
 ended the fearsome life of Tataka
 the terror of Dandaka. 703

Born a Yakshi but a demoness grown,
 Tataka had roamed the woods,
 harassed the Rishis and desecrated
 their sanctified premises. 704

With her mastery of witchcraft, her flair
 for changing her shape at will,
 Tataka had spread confusion all round —
 that chapter is now over. 705

The Princes had then gone with the Rishi
 to his own Siddhashrama,
 a spot consecrated in times of yore
 by Viṣṇu and Vamana. 706

Received by the Ashrama anchorites
 with love and ceremony,
 Rama begged the great Rishi to enter
 on his sacrificial vows. 707

'Twas a Yaga spread o'er six days and nights,
 and the intent Kausika
 fed the fire with oblations manifold,
 and the altar was ablaze. 708

While all went well, on the sixth and last day,
 Mārīcha — Tataka's son —
 and Subāhu, vengeful evil-doers,
 tried to thwart the Sacrifice. 709

Rama went into action instantly,
 and while casting Marīcha
 into the sea, quite destroyed Subahu
 and the other night-rovers. 710

And so was the Sacrifice concluded
 and feeling fulfilled at last,
 the Rishi left Siddhashrama for good,
 and was homing to the North. 711

Some inscrutable divinity shapes
 our ends, and we don't see all:
 Ahalya's resurrection on the way,
 the timely arrival here, 712

the promised exposure of Shiva's Bow,
 all somehow team together.
 For myself, my friends, I do look forward
 to a brighter tomorrow." 713

The speaker had put so much assurance
 into her brief reportage
 that no questions were asked, no doubts were raised,
 and the company dispersed. 714

Later that night, as she lay on her bed,
 Sita had the odd feeling
 she was embarking on an unknown sea
 of infinite surmises. 715

The image of the Prince of Ayodhya,
 while it was indelibly
 imprinted on her heart, caused no flutter
 but just filled the whole canvas. 716

How was it she had no sense of surprise,
 registered no reaction
 to the Face, but merely felt the deep joy
 of waking up to the Light! 717

It was as though she was a drop of milk
 grown aware of the milky
 ocean of immeasurable expanse
 and total beatitude. 718

She was content to accept, and be lost,
 in the sheer infinitudes
 of Space and Time; and deep sleep then claimed her,
 and blanketed her in bliss. 719

Soon the great day dawned, and on their coming
 to Janaka's palace grounds,
 Visvamitra suggested that the Bow
 might be shown to the Princes. 720

Janaka recalled the Bow's history,
 the manner of Sita's birth
 and the decision to make its stringing
 the bride-price of the Princess. 721

Then he ordered that the marvellous Bow
 be brought to the pavilion,
 and offered Sita's hand to Prince Rama
 should he string the Bow indeed. 722

The formidable Bow was now conveyed
in its eight-wheeled container,
and on the King suggesting, the Rishi
assenting, Rama drew near. 723

A silence vast and profound, and a tense
and taut uncertainty, reigned
in the spacious grounds, and the priests, princes
and princesses held their breaths. 724

With a light-glancing movement, Rama raised
the lid, and sighting the Bow,
he seized and lifted it as if it were
little more than a feather. 725

Ten thousand pairs of eyes were rivetted
on him when he bent the Bow
and tried to string it — but the massive arc
cracked and broke in the middle. 726

And the noise was like deafening thunder,
a mountain breaking apart,
and the earth seemed to tremble for the nonce,
and wonderment filled the air. 727

When the congregation had recovered
from the pang of Rama's feat
and tremors of the joy of fulfilment
were beginning to be heard; 728

when in the crowded women's enclosure
the faces were wreathed in smiles
and speechless intimations of delight
were being silently shared; 729

Janaka declared that Rama had won
with the bride-price of valour
the hand of Sita the unique Earth-born
• and daughter of Mithila 730

Mid a burst of universal acclaim
and full-throated rejoicings,
Rama returned to Visvamitra's side
and seemed poised for the future. 731

Janaka now sent word to Ayodhya
apprising Dasaratha
and inviting the King to Mithila
to solemnise the wedding. 732

After three days and nights, the couriers
 reached Ayodhya, and seeking
 an audience with King Dasaratha,
 gave him Janaka's message: 733

"With Kausika's blessing, Mithila's King
 sends word that his prized daughter,
 Sita, has been won by Rama, your son,
 with the meed of his valour. 734

I had proclaimed that stringing the great Bow
 Mithila had long cherished
 was Sita's unique bride-price, and many
 had come, and failed, and gone back. 735

But Rama broke the Bow while stringing it,
 and thus won resoundingly.
 Come, O King, to Mithila with your train,
 and let the wedding take place." 736

Dasaratha shared his joy with the Queens,
 Kausalya, Sumitra and
 Kaikeyi; his preceptors, Vasishta,
 Vamadeva, Kasyapa; 737

and his ministers, friends and advisers;
 and they journeyed for four days
 and were received by Janaka with due
 honour and ceremony. 738

There were fraternal greetings on all sides,
 an atmosphere of joyance
 and it was hoped the wedding would take place
 when the Sacrifice ended. 739

Next morning, when all concerned — Kings, Sages
 and the rest — had assembled,
 the god-like Vasishta spoke of the race
 of the line of Ikshvakus: 740

of King Kukshi and his son Vikukshi,
 and in the same royal line
 Bāna, Anaranya, Dundumara,
 Trisanku and Māndhātā; 741

of Susandhi, Bharata, Dileepa,
 Bagīr̥tha, Kakutstha —
 a line celebrated, including names
 like Ambarīsha, Aja, 742

and Dasaratha himself, and his four
valiant and righteous sons:
Rama, and Lakshmana, and Bharata,
and Satrughna the youngest. 743

Janaka responded by detailing
the family history
of the Videhas: succeeding Nimi,
Mithi the first Janaka; 744

then a succession of Kings, including
Devarata who received
Shiva's Bow as a trust; and the latest
of the Janakas, himself. 745

He added that, besides Sita, he had
another child, Urmila;
and his younger brother had two daughters,
Mandavi, Srutakirti. 746

And with joy abounding, King Janaka
offered his darling daughter,
Sita, as Rama's bride, and her sister,
Urmila, as Lakshmana's. 747

Seizing the moment as ripe, Kausika
had a word with Vasishta,
and made a suggestion to Janaka
as also Dasaratha: 748

"Great and noble are your Houses, O Kings
of Ayodhya, Mithila;
and these auspicious alliances mean
enhancement of their glories. 749

I suggest a further doubling of strengths:
let Kusadhvaja's daughters,
Mandavi and Srutakirti marry
• Bharata and Satrughna." 750

The words came like nectar to Janaka,
and 'twas agreed that all four
marriages would take place on the same day
of *Uttara-phalguni*. 751

Canto 11: Sita's Marriage

The auspicious day dawned o'er Mithila,
the whole city was aroused,
and princes, priests and commoners alike
were assembled together. 752

Dasaratha with his sons, Janaka
with the Princesses, all met
at the Sacrificial altar, the tongues
of flame offering welcome. 753

While Vasishta with Visvamitra's and
Satananda's assistance
attended to the sacramental side
and offered the oblations, 754

Janaka led his holy resplendent
daughter to where Rama stood
near the altar, and said these moving words:
"This is Sita, my daughter: 755

she's the unique bride whose exemplary
worth, beauty and blessedness
match your own, and she'll share the great burden
of your royal destiny. 756

Take her by the hand, she'll be a partner
in your path of righteousness;
loving and devoted, she'll follow you
like a shadow: God bless you!" 757

And in the presence of the Sacred Fire,
Sunayana told Sita
that, for a wife, adhesion to her Lord
was the sum of all duties. 758

As the wedding was solemnised with chants
and sacramental water,
Rama and Sita were the eternal
Lord and his eternal Spouse. 759

And the consortium of the Sages
and Rishis and elders blessed
the couple, and the kettledrums sounded,
and many shed tears of joy. 760

Janaka called Lakshmana next, and when
 he neared the altar, asked him
 to take Urmila by the hand, and tread
 always the path of Dharma. 761

Now it was Bharata's turn, and he too
 walked to the altar and took
 Mandavi by the hand; last, Satrugna
 and the fair Srutakirti. 762

All four pairs thus joined in holy wedlock
 walked round the respective fires,
 once, and a second time, and a third time,
 and soft music filled the air. 763

Flowers and felicitations, flowers
 and benedictions, flowers
 and jubliant singing, dancing, laughing:
 and so the rites concluded. 764

Janaka's great Sacrifice, attended
 by Rishis so many, drawn
 from the four quarters; and the addition
 of the four-fold marriage rites: 765

the two auspicious events coalescing
 and commingling and fusing,
 there was fulness doubled with fulfilment,
 the feel of felicity. 766

The Princesses and their royal spouses
 bedecked in glowing raiment,
 the women's eyes sparkling, their pretty feet
 moving with a dancer's ease: 767

the bridegrooms, boyish and kingly at once,
 walking with the poise of strength,
 glancing in expectancy at the brides
 • looking and acting their part: 768

the quartet of married couples that joined
 the two famed royal Houses
 of Ayodhya and Mithila, were launched
 on their holy wedded lives 769

with a rare shower of Grace from Above
 and the ardent good wishes
 of the Rishis, elders and relations
 following them all along . . . 770

And the wedding, what did it really mean?

The sacrament of marriage,
for all its formal specifications,
had its true sanction elsewhere. 771

Always it was Purusha eternal
and Prakriti primordial
who descended into clay to subsist
in complementary forms! 772

Left alone at last, heroic Rama
and virgin Sita, playing
their terrestrial human roles, still found
no need to break into speech. 773

They weren't strangers, they had known each other,
— when? how? in what clime? how long? —
they hadn't ever separated to need
a base of communion now! 774

Nevertheless out of ocean silence
some ripples of speech surfaced,
and the two played their significant parts
in the sanctioned human way. 775

"By selecting you, Sita, as my life's
partner," said Rama softly,
"my father has blessed me with happiness
beyond any measurement." 776

Sita was quick to intervene: "I thought
your breaking the mighty Bow
won me for you. Had you failed to lift it,
like all those others, what then?" 777

Rama smiled as he answered: "O the Bow!
For me it was boyish sport,
though I also knew of the codicil:
but my father clinched the choice. 778

Now that you're mine, Sita, you'll occupy
the central space in my heart.
We have long months and years ahead of us,
and we will grow together." 779

"But Rama, for me you'll be my whole world,
and will fill my heart entire.
The future is always ambiguous,
yet my true love will prevail." 780

- Rama said: "Like my father, my mother
Kausalya has blessed us too."
"So has the Queen, my mother," said Sita,
and then archly continued: 781
- "Do you know that, having seen you enter
the Hall, and as in a flash
read the signature of my soul's secret,
I had made a quick resolve: 782
- that should you by some mischance fail to string
the resistant Shiva's Bow,
or some other archer achieve the feat
and then stake his claim to me: 783
- rather than face a life-time's inferno
denied the choice of my heart —
or the worse hell of a misalliance! —
I would terminate my life!" 784
- Although mature for his years and possessed
of adult understanding,
Rama was almost thrown off his balance
by this confession, and said: 785
- "What's this mighty force or faith or frenzy,
this mystery that defies
prudence and reason and calculation
but swears by its certainty? 786
- Who would have thought, Sita, that one like you
who had lived a sheltered life,
seemingly all sweetness and tenderness,
could contemplate such a step? 787
- But a fugitive moment, yet I too
must have caught your face at once,
for mid all the excitement that followed
it was enshrined in my heart. 788
- Late at night, in the lucid hinterland
of the silent sea of thought,
the Face and the Presence pursued me still,
and I hardly knew my mind. 789
- My novel feelings lacked definition,
they had neither form nor name,
but they released an exhilaration
in the interior mindscape. 790

And suppose you were married already!

But no, that wasn't possible,
for I knew my heart's throb wouldn't be way-ward
and seek the forbidden fruit. 791

And so doubt wrestled with faith in the fog
of the intermediate world
of fantasy and fear, till I was lost
in dreamless beatitude. 792

Life has the look of a series of lamps,
each flickering by itself;
yet the sequence has been ordained elsewhere
towards a still unknown goal. 793

When Rishi Visvamitra demanded
of my father that I should
follow him to Dandaka and keep guard
over his Siddhashrama, 794

neither Lakshmana nor I could have thought
of demoness Tataka,
of Ahalya's resurrection, or yet
of these quadruple weddings. 795

Perhaps the all-wise Visvamitra had
the requisite foreknowledge,
but even he had to wait on events
in poised anticipation." 796

"It makes me humble," said Sita softly,
"that such great felicity
can with so much ease be vouchsafed to us,
unworthy as we may be!" 797

Lakshmana, when he found himself alone
with reticent Urmila,
struggled for words, for his happiness had
long been centered in Rama. 798

"You are precious to me," he said fumbling,
"as Sita's younger sister:
Rama's the God of my religious faith,
and Sita the true goddess. 799

But Urmila, you will be dear to me
because, as co-worshippers
of Rama and Sita, we'll inherit
the joy of divine service. 800

And Urmila, you'll find in my mother,
 Sumitra, a woman kind,
 and a Mahatma besides, and you can
 trust her unquestioningly." 801

"I'm content, Lakshmana," said Urmila;
 "those that stand and wait and serve,
 they find happiness too; let's, then, find love
 in true worshipful service." 802

Bharata and Mandavi were rather
 mature and matter-of-fact,
 and talked first of the ramifications
 of the two Royal Houses. 803

While Bharata spoke of Ayodhya's charms
 and Kekaya's attractions,
 and of his strong-willed mother Kaikeyi
 and his uncle Yudhajit, 804

Mandavi was half lyrical about
 her father, Kusadhvaja,
 and the opulence of her Sānkāśya
 fed by the īk-humati. 805

"I don't know, Mandavi," Bharata said,
 "what twists are ahead of us,
 and the more your face and features please me,
 the more the future awes me. 806

My deeper involvement is with Rama,
 for he's more than my brother;
 I may not walk near him like his shadow,
 as peerless Lakshmana does — 807

but Rama, I'm not apart from Rama;
 and the inseparable
 Śatrughna is my other self; and now
 you'll be the soul of my soul, 808

and perhaps, wher things go awry, and fair
 turns foul, and Time's out of joint,
 you'll sustain me — silently and unseen —
 and that'll be the higher bliss." 809

Mandavi hardly knew what to make out
 of these wild and winged words:
 "Bharata, I sense the love and anguish,
 but not their precise meaning. 810

I can see we're on the twilight threshold
 of times unpredictable:
 and should you ever make calls on my love
 and faith, I swear compliance!" 811

"We're the youngest couple, Srutakirti,"
 said Sumitra's younger son;
 "and this can mean freedom from all worry,
 or a baggage of problems. 812

Look, my three brothers and your three sisters
 may have to face challenges,
 trials, tribulations—I can't say what—
 yet they will safely come through. 813

But somewhere behind, ensconced in safety,
 ours could be the taxing roles,
 nothing sensational, spectacular,
 yet vital and important. 814

Thus you and I, Srutakirti, loving
 and being loved, not scorning
 obscurity or dreary routine,
 will fulfil our destinies." 815

"O Satrugghna! terror of enemies!"
 said Srutakirti smiling,
 "amen! let's seek the Infinite in nought,
 and find romance in boredom!" 816

Even so the Raghus and the children
 of the House of Janaka
 made forays into the field of language
 and shaped their elusive thoughts. 817

The mind paused or raced or ran in reverse
 gear, thoughts simmered, and feelings
 desperately asked for definition:
 the soul, of course, was silent. 818

But out of all this inner commotion
 the words issued quite chiselled—
 the product of the culture of ages!—
 and had their distinctive stamp. 819

And so the four happy wedded couples,
 now finding themselves alone
 for the first time, shuffled off hangovers
 and conversed with ready ease. 820

Their looks were eloquent, and when they smiled
or laughed, or made a gesture,
they seemed to indite unconscious poetry
and their speech grew symphonic. 821

And the minutes passed, their understanding
doubled itself through sharing,
and as night deepened, the eternities
lost themselves in the silence. 822

And Rishi Visvamitra lay sleepless
in his arbour, and wrestled
with the miscellany of memories
revived by Satyananda. 823

In retrospect, where was the sense in all
that prolonged trial of strength
with Sage Vasishta, and all the fall-out
that caused hurt to so many! 824

It had been throughout an unequal fight
that should never have begun:
and was the end of the affair no more
than an empty victory? 825

He was suspicious of condescension,
and his warm heart had never
shackled itself to his head, or to laws
barren, hidebound and cruel. 826

He had always meant well, and yet the kink
in his vital consciousness
started link-reactions with their tally
of manifold suffering. 827

Now it all came back to him with a pang
the folly of wagering
with Vasishta about Harischandra's
total adhesion to Truth. 828

But Harischandra would more willingly
break than bend, and readily
gave up kingdom, his wife Chandramati,
his son, his freedom itself! 829

Was it wise to have riven spouse from spouse,
and driven them to the dark?
That primal sin asked for expiation
in fairly similar terms. 830

He felt happy he had guided Rama
to deserted Gautama's
hermitage, seen Ahalya rise again,
and greet her returning Lord. 831

Even the remembered scene was as balm
to his self-accusing soul,
and oh, how relieved was Satananda
hearing of the reunion! 832

And now the Divine had helped the Rishi
to advance and encompass
this series of royal weddings linking
Videha and Kosala. 833

"Ah this is the proper auspicious note
that should end my ministry,"
murmured the satisfied Visvamitra,
and sleep presently claimed him. 834

BOOK TWO
AYODHYA

Canto 12: **Darkness after Dawn**

So soon as beneficent Dawn shone forth over Mithila next day, the worshipful Visvamitra took leave of the kings, sages, princes,	1
and started on his journey to the peace of his far Retreat amidst the snow-white Himalayan fastnesses in high heaven's neighbourhood.	2
Rama's tutelage in arms had ended with the breaking of the Bow, the significant bride-price of valour for winning Maithili's hand.	3
Kausika's own classic confrontation with Vasishtha, the chequered and prolonged adventure of advancement from King to Brahma Rishi:	4
the tantalising spiral of ascent bridging the infinitudes, the apotheosis at Siddhashrama, the acme of Fulfilment:	5
the timely redemption of Ahalya, her reunion with her Lord: the meeting with Janaka, the wedding of Rama and Maithili:	6
Visvamitra, half-reading the future as from a Book held open, was now content to retire from the scene and let the action unfold.	7
After the sage Kausika's departure, Dasaratha, his royal retinue, the entire marriage party along with the four Princes,	8
and Maithili and the other three brides each endowed with a dowry vast and variegated comprising cows, carpets, maids-in-attendance,	9

and a largesse of precious stones, sapphires,
 rubies, pearls, gold and silver:
 taking leave of their Host, the party left
 Mithila for Ayodhya. 10

The festive caravan had not gone far —
 the Rishis leading, the King
 at the head of the four constituents
 of his excellent Army: 11

the royal ladies carried with a lilt
 in their nimble palanquins —
 when ambiguous omens erupted
 confusing Dasaratha. 12

A cyclonic wind violently blew,
 the Army's morale suffered
 erosion, and the cavalcade felt trapped
 in the gathering darkness. 13

The caravan lost its tight formation,
 there was something like panic
 and some of the platoons and carriages
 were wrenched away from the main. 14

The Rishis themselves feeling ill at ease,
 the King was a prey to fear,
 the horses and elephants seemed disturbed,
 and the attendants fainted. 15

In the developing situation
 of bleak darkness after dawn,
 divers groups and sundry personages
 reacted frantically: 16

"Is it the end of the world?" queried some;
 "Yama's onslaught!" sighed others;
 "Who would have thought that so fair a morning
 could turn so foul soon after!" 17

Vasishta, hiding his own concern, tried
 to calm the terrified King,
 and the more seasoned reasoned with the rest
 not to panic and succumb. 18

In the wild confusion of the moment
 and the impact of the gale,
 one of the palanquins drifted away
 as if driven from behind. 19

The bearers seemed helpless, for the dust-whirl
and the blanket of darkness
hampered freedom of movement, and they could
neither turn back nor hold on. 20

The twin occupants of the palanquin,
Maithili and Urmila,
felt ruffled by the cyclonic upset
but held themselves in patience. 21

By direction of some obscure sixth sense,
the bearers wilted and lounged
yet purblindly negotiated their way
through the dust and the darkness. 22

Already the palanquin was steering
a course of its own, pushing
than being pushed by the panting bearers
towards a destination. 23

The din and dust and the pall of darkness
grew less and less, the bearers
could see the green smiling earth more clearly,
and they now felt more at ease. 24

The sky was clear again, the commotion
and fear had been left behind,
and the bearers could see at some distance
the vague outlines of a hut. 25

Maithili, admirable in her poise
of self-control, felt a leap
of recognition, and asked the bearers
to set the palanquin down. 26

“Let us walk up to yonder hermitage”,
said Sita to Urmila;
“let’s meet the inmates, offer obeisance,
and seek their benedictions.” 27

Lightly stepping down from the palanquin
they walked with quick eager steps,
paused at the wicket for a while before
entering the Ashrama. 28

Beyond the vestibule, they suddenly
stood arrested, for they saw
a presence, a Light, a woman divine
receiving them with a smile. 29

Sita knew at once it was Ahalya
the Bride of Resurrection,
the victor of askesis, and Woman
ageless and forever young. 30

“Mother Ahalya!” Sita cried, her eyes
filled with tears, and fell prostrate;
and Urmila followed: ‘twas a moment
of maturity for them. 31

The gracious understanding Ahalya
raised them with her hands, embraced
them warmly, and with the touch of her palms
conveyed her benedictions. 32

“Welcome, my children!” she said, and added:
“but you who are in bridal
weeds, what has brought you to this Ashrama,
and in such tell-tale distress?” 33

The light of communion flashed, and Sita
returned a ready reply:
“I’m Maithili Sita, Janaka’s child;
this, my sister Urmila. 34

But yesterday, King Dasaratha’s son,
Rama, ordained me his wife,
and his younger brother, Prince Lakshmana,
married my dear Urmila. 35

This morning, journeying to Ayodhya,
we saw sinister omens,
and darkness, disturbing winds and dust-whirls
threw us into confusion. 36

Our palanquin was somehow sharply wrenched
from the crawling caravan,
and after frightening uncertainties
we were led to this threshold. 37

Ah Mother Ahalya, Providence does
shape our ends indeed, and out
of the briars of alarm and danger
extracts the nectar of Grace!” 38

In a sharp accession of pain and joy
Ahalya embraced Sita
murmuring the language of mother-love
and measureless gratitude. 39

"Sita, Sita!" she almost cried in joy.

"O immaculate Earth-born,
my redeemer Rama's resplendent spouse,
 auspiciousness becomes you!" 40

She paused and sighed deeply and continued:

"Ah Sita, but don't you know—
haven't you heard about my sad history,
 and what I owe to Rama?" 41

As Urmila with her great self-control
 stood tongue-tied and statuesque,
Sita drew close to Ahalya and said:
 "Mother, he has told me all. 42

For Rama and Lakshmana, as also
 for Urmila and myself,
you're Woman with the badge of Sufferance,
 Woman human and divine. 43

Blest was the moment he crossed your threshold
 and beheld you, new-risen
like Goddess Lakshmi out of the lotus,
 and paid obeisance to you. 44

What's there for us to know, O sweet Mother,
 what can our ignorance know
about the ways of gods, men and demons,
 and who will presume to judge?" 45

Once again Ahalya cast on the twain
 her deep compassionate look,
led them to an enclosure seating them
 on the bare well-seasoned floor. 46

There she sat, like monumental Patience,
 stainless white and pure serene,
confronting heaven, the limits of hell,
 and our entire earth as well. 47

Then, from the depths of her past agony,
 her soothing ambrosial voice
indited the music of suffering
 and the hymn of alchemy: 48

"Sita, Urmila! may joy attend you
 all your life, may pain never
cross your path, may you find the joy supreme
 in Rama and Lakshmana. 49

And yet, dear innocent children, I must
 lay open my heart to you;
indelible the script that's written there,
 a warning for womankind!"

Canto 13: Ahalya's Outburst

- After a pause and a dismissive shrug
that silenced hesitation,
Ahalya came out of the clinging clouds
of viperous memory, 51
- and, as if with a definitive jerk,
the mythical and living
Ahalya, sepulchrally serious
yet tremblingly vivacious, 52
- her reticence o'ercome by defiance,
her eyes shimmering with love,
her voice a power of incantation,
she spoke to the Princesses: 53
- "This our world is doubtless charged with beauty,
and beauty is Truth and Love,
and beauty is sweet, beauty is *madhu*,
beauty is sheer *ananda*. 54
- In practice, though, our all too familiar
ground of being is peppered
with seductive sinister booby-traps,
and woe to the unwary! 55
- In the cockpit of penitential earth,
Devas, Asuras and Men
wage their interminable battles for
mastery or survival. 56
- No holds are barred - the demons are selfish
and acquisitive, the gods
jealous of their power and their glory,
and we're but pawns in their game. 57
- They talk of human frailty, my children,
but the vast scenario
of earth-life is a manifestation
of the feuding egoisms. 58
- My mystic antecedents didn't guard me,
nor my being the righteous
Gautama's spouse, nor yet my long-tested
relationship with my Lord. 59

The whole brood of Devas was jealous
 of Gautama's eminence,
 and Indra too had old scores to settle—
 the blow had to fall on me! 60

I was a trapped animal, and the gods
 gambled for my transgression,
 and ere I knew what it was I had done,
 I had doomed myself indeed. 61

When unseemly illegitimate lust,
 born of the ego's petty
 fevers of aggressive desire, smothers
 reason and restraint alike, 62

there's nothing the wretched male animal
 will refrain from exploiting—
 cunning, fraud, masks, coward self-abasement
 for encompassing his end. 63

By a quirk of misfortune, place and time
 and attendant circumstance
 might all conspire to drag the unwary
 and land her in the abyss! 64

When the so-called 'god of gods' plays the cad
 and conspires to entangle
 in his meshes of insatiable lust
 a woman in slumber's daze. 65

the struggle is not evenly balanced,
 frailty is rendered more frail,
 the wily rover scores an easy win—
 but 'tis the woman that pays. 66

And O Sita, the incorrigible
 Indra, the impenitent,
 although wedded to the noble Sachi
 the feminine paragon, 67

the renegade lord of the upper air
 would neither learn nor forget;
 and every time he sins against the Light
 he plays Time's poltroon and knave. 68

Once when the fair Ruchi was left alone
 in her syl an Hermitage,
 for her spouse, Deva Sarman, was away
 performing a Sacrifice 69

the wretched Indra thought he had his chance
 and made haste to approach her
 with all the display of his peacock-plumes
 and push of unbridled lust. 70

But there was the vigilant Vipula
 the Rishi's young disciple
 alert to counter the lecherous god's
 mad moves and machinations. 71

Sitting immobile and rather aloof
 near the Ashrama entrance,
 the half-hidden Vipula, tense in thought,
 watched the developing scene 72

Then, in a pre-emptive action, he fixed
 his blazing eyes on Ruchi's
 in a decisive mesmerising stare,
 and made her immune from harm. 73

Leaving his own body untenanted —
 no more than a statue now! —
 Vipula's puissant soul held her captive,
 and she wore a vacant look. 74

The unashamed impetuous Indra
 in a fever of passion
 drew closer, but ghost-like she only asked:
 "Stranger, what has brought you here?" 75

Like a chill blast from Himavant, the words
 caused a shrinking of the god,
 his startled eyes saw the Presence within,
 and panic overpowered him. 76

Back in his own shining Yogic body,
 the ascetic sprang forward
 and spoke to the guilty god clumsily
 beating a shamefaced retreat: 77

'Was it not enough, O god ungodly,
 that Gautama in his ire
 cursed you with an all-sex shape for the wrong
 you had done to Ahalya? 78

Get thee gone with your badge of infamy
 ere my full wrath turns on you,
 or the Rishi my Preceptor returns
 and destroys you with a look.' 79

And with this defeat and ignominy
 the diminished and crumbling
 Indra disappeared among the dark clouds
 with a whimper and a whine. 80

Ah Sita, the almost vulnerable
 and unsuspecting Ruchi
 was yet saved by the protective armour
 cast on her by Vipula. 81

'Twas, besides, in the tell-tale light of day,
 and not during the witching
 penumbra between darkness and the dawn
 that breeds dreams and fantasies. 82

And worse and worse, the interloper god
 came disguised as Gautama
 seized with a frenzy of instant desire—
 and my frailty undid me. 83

I say this, Sita, not in self-defence,
 for my soul, were it awake,
 should have seen through the ruse and wickedness
 and flayed the false god alive. 84

But this I would say, Sita, Urmila,
 'tis safer to have a shield
 like the wide-awake Muni Vipula
 whom no trespasser can cheat. 85

Ruchi was rather naive, but he was there
 like a great life-belt around,
 a guardian spirit whose strong antennae
 were a wall of insurance. 86

No doubt; Sita, there's the soul's secret strength
 of which we are unaware,
 but the elect may invoke its reserves
 and immobilise the foe. 87

Gautama tells me that the greatest feat
 is not simply to checkmate
 or destroy, but knead and transform the dross
 into the golden sublime. 88

A true nonpareil of our womankind
 is Sati Anasuya,
 Rishi Atri's sainted spouse; she charges
 earth-life with a glow divine. 89

- And the wondrous tale is told of Sati
Savitri, Aswapathy's
daughter, who wrested her Satyavan's life
from Yama, the lord of death. 90
- Aye, the name, its invocation, can be
a potent incantation,
and her dialectic of transcendence
chases the shadows away. 91
- But then, more easily caught as we are
in the moment's confusion,
the hapless ones opt for the lesser lure,
and only Grace can redeem. 92
- Let not this outburst, children, scarify
or darken the path ahead;
the human psyche is destined to fare
forward and reach greater heights. 93
- Asura and Rakshasa will alike
be left behind, and the gods,
even they may be exceeded at last
by the New Woman, New Man. 94
- While the spiralling climb is long and steep
and this errant life is brief,
there's yet the sovereign reserve force of Grace,
and on that we must rely. 95
- Grace is greater than all the denizens
of the upper or nether
worlds, and Grace came to me in the person
and power of Raghava!" 96
- She was shaken by sobs, but she quickly
gained control; and her frail frame
was now lit by her soul's light, and she blessed
the young brides with all her heart. 97
- They didn't of course comprehend all they heard,
but they couldn't miss the tension,
nor the tenor, of Ahalya's outburst,
nor her anguished commitment. 98
- But before either of them could find words,
Ahalya was once more rocked
by an uncontrollable emotion
and spoke out as one inspired: 99

- “O my dear children, O inheritors
of the load of all past years,
O daughters of this age, its heritage
of pain, and its hope and faith: 100
- it is not the poisoned past that disturbs
the feel of security,
but the abominations that I see
on the screens of the future. 101
- I see in a bleeding and blinding flash
the fair fouled with callous ease,
I see numberless discriminations
and squalid aberrations; 102
- I see the delicate Nara-Nāri
harmony mauled and mangled,
I see home and hearth and the sacred Fire
riven and desecrated; 103
- I see things — how shall I now describe them?—
I see such horrendous things,
sepulchral sequences and denouements
that defy understanding. 104
- I see Man stooping low enough to shame
the Asura and the Beast;
I see Woman unfeminised, flaunting
her crass unwomanliness. 105
- Not the worst yet: I see the devil-dance
of the seven deadly sins;
I see women staled, enslaved; and female
children cast out unwanted. 106
- I see widows on the funeral pyres
of their late partners in life,
and I see child widows of cherubim
innocence branded with sin! 107
- None is spared alas, only degraded
with abominations done
to their persons and psyches; and I see
bride-burnings and dowry-deaths! 108
- Why have I returned to life to view these
precipitous descents from
Woman as Shakti and Grace to Woman
as object and possession! 109

No more, no more are they divinities,
the power-embodiments
of majesty, strength, beauty, compassion,
largesse, love, magnificence--- 110

not Maheshvari, nor Sarasvati,
nor Tripurasundari:
the new blasphemy deflates the woman
from goddess to gadgetry! 111

Past the long millenniums of chequered
terrestrial history,
I see the degraded, demoralised
toy, sport, game, fun, footstool, slave: 112

a consumerist piece of merchandise
to be bought, got, bartered, sold,
used, misused, abused, or left long unused
and callously cast away: 113

woman, woman, placed on a pedestal
one moment, then ignobly
herded with a hundred other victims
in the gilded gynaeceum! 114

Can a time ever unfold when woman
will be able to resist
the thousand varieties of violence
to her body and psyche?" 115

Ahalya, shaken by spasms anew,
yet with a mighty effort
regained her self-control and self-knowledge
and triumphant self-respect. 116

"I don't know, Sita, what came over me,"
she said weakly, haltingly;
"perhaps these are but feverish fancies,
and therefore of no account 117

And I know that at the heart of all things
there reigns the august power
of Grace, and whatever the appearance,
Grace shapes events in the end. 118

The sky may seem o'ercast, and lightning and
thunder may split it apart,
but patience, faith and a trustful waiting,
and the earth will smile once more. 119

Urmila, and Sita my Rama's bride,
 providential this meeting;
 I'll watch o'er you with a mother's concern
 and insulate you from harm." 120

As she raised her hand in a fond gesture
 of blessing and protection,
 there was a rustle of footsteps without,
 and Srutakirti burst in. 121

Followed Mandavi, and there was relief
 and excitement as she cried:
 "We've found you at last, Sita, Urmila!
 They're seeking you everywhere." 122

A renewed brightness lit Maithili's face
 as she sprang up and embraced
 her sisters, and she asked them to offer
 obeisance to Ahalya. 123

Her face shone with a lucent ecstasy
 as she blessed the sisters all,
 and the sage and serious Mandavi
 now recalled the happenings: 124

"You know, Sita, we were trapped in darkness
 and made senseless by panic;
 but the suspense was broken by a shout
 from what seemed a mighty blaze. 125

It was axe-wielding Parashurama,
 his eyes glaring with anger,
 his hand holding a horrifying Bow
 and an ominous arrow. 126

We learned that, incensed by Rama's breaking
 of Shiva's bow, Bhargava
 had flourished the companion Vishnu's Bow
 and dared Rama to string it. 127

While the terrified King and those around
 scented the end of the world,
 Rama swiftly strung the Bow and fitted
 the arrow, and spoke calmly: 128

"See, I've done what you thought I could not do:
 tell me whither I shall send
 this arrow, for while I will spare your life,
 the charge must have its target." 129

Canto 14: Apprenticeship in Kingcraft

'Twas a spontaneous and hearty welcome
they received in the City,
and the o'erjoyed citizens had come out
and met them at some distance; 137

and banners, trumpets, music, shouts of praise,
flowers, flowers all the way,
and the elders with their benedictions,
and all faces bright with cheer. 138

The four wedded couples were now assigned
luxuriant suites of rooms,
and the happy Queen-Mothers – Kausalya,
Sumitra and Kaikeyi — 139

guided them around the city's Temples
as also the palace shrines,
and watched the newly married offer their
rich oblations in the Fire 140

When they were back at last in their Chambers,
Sita recalled to Rama
her extraordinary conversation
with prophetic-Ahalya 141

Rama was withdrawn for a while in thought,
for he saw as in a flash
the earlier mystic phenomenon
of her transfiguration 142

Then he said soothingly to Maithili
"In Ahalya's history
womanhood has a scalding memory
and the hope of transcendence " 143

Weeks passed and, on a request from Uncle
Yudhajt, the King agreed
that Bharata and Satrughna should spend
some time in Rajagriha 144

In Kekaya's fair capital city,
they found enlightening things,
and Uncle and Grandfather loaded them
with generous attention. 145

Meanwhile in Ayodhya there was the burst
 of a new efflorescence,
 and commoner and elect alike had
 the blessings of righteous rule. 146

The coming of Sita the auspicious
 Earth-born to Dasaratha's
 Kingdom, and the married state of Rama
 and Sita, were gifts of Grace. 147

They were happy, and were the fountain-source
 of happiness in others,
 for there was witnessed a daily beauty
 in their holy wedded life. 148

And Sita, while she missed her Mithila,
 she hardly felt a stranger
 in Ayodhya's stately mansions, busy,
 streets, or among its people. 149

With a compelling native ease she forged
 the right equation with all,
 and at no time was she plagued with a sense
 of wry alienation. 150

If Rama was a mosaic of many
 virtues and accomplishments,
 Sita too shone as a rare ensemble
 of the graces and glories. 151

She knew the language of courteous address
 and won the approbation
 of Kausalya, Sumitra, Kaikeyi,
 and Dasaratha as well. 152

Soon after settling down in Ayodhya,
 Sita along with Rama
 'visited Sage Vasishta's Ashrama
 beyond the city's confines. 153

They offered obeisance to the Rishi
 and Arundhati his spouse,
 and while the Priest and the Prince held converse
 on the concerns of the State, 154

the Rishipatni guided the Princess
 to an inner enclosure,
 and Sita forged the links of love at once,
 and they spoke without restraint. 155

"For my sisters as for me," said Sita,
 "you've been an impossible
 exemplar of the feminine sublime,
 like Mithila's Maitreyi.

156

And during my journey to Ayodhya,
 I also happened to meet
 the prophetess-like Ahalya, after
 her phenomenal rebirth.

157

Having arrived at the High Road of life,
 while the primrose path invites,
 already I've had a feel of the thorns,
 and now seek godspeed from you."

158

"Ah my child!" said Arundhati softly,
 "you do not know what you are,
 and it's best so; but receive my blessings,
 Sita, and may you prosper.

159

Having seen many cycles of seasons,
 the likes of me have a store
 of experience which distils sometimes
 into a sort of wisdom.

160

But the future can defy the wisest:
 what we might see are pointers,
 and often a hazy incoherence
 or a crass contradiction.

161

I was one of nine daughters, my mother
 was the famed Devahuti,
 my father, Kardama Prajāpati;
 and I married Vasishtha.

162

Can you ask for a finer conjunction
 of favoured antecedents?
 I'm becoming a proverb, prototype,
 a way of life and learning.

163

But all this means little, for the future
 baffles me as much as you,
 and beyond the firm reliance on Grace
 no other safeguard I know.

164

The past is gone, the future hasn't arrived;
 and this atomic instant
 tries a fusion of the eternities,
 and feels thwarted and let down.

165

You may have heard of the prolonged feuding
between Vasishtha my Lord
and the formidable Visvamitra:
what weariness of spirit! 166

And so it is, almost always: knowledge
hastens, but wisdom lingers;
hence the endless need for humility,
and the reliance on Grace. 167

Sita, Sita, my tired old eyes yet see
you framed in infinity:
you're come to humankind as a power,
a penance and a promise. 168

I see the veiled contradictions, the clouds,
the lightnings and the rumblings,
and also the Sun, the steady splendour
beyond: God bless you, my child!" 169

While Sita's surface mind felt rather dazed,
there was a descent of peace
and puissance in the uncanny listening
of her consecrated soul. 170

She smiled at the achieved poise within,
and made obeisance again;
and they rejoined Vasishtha and Rama
as they were about to rise. 171

Thus Rama with his eyes aflame with joy:
"Besides Kingcraft, Sita, I've
also learnt from the Sage the Seven Steps
of Ascent towards the Truth. 172

Let's aspire, Sita, for the auspicious,
act with discrimination,
rid ourselves from the taint of attachment.
• these are the ground of the rest. 173

We might then be able to view the world
of forms as illusory
since the One both underscores and transcends
all, and we're That, That alone. 174

And so, Sita, the Sage advises us
that we should seize, dismantle
and destroy the ego-knot of vipers,
and rise to the highest Light. 175

The Guru's lucid teaching, Maithili,
 can be the best sheet-anchor
 in the troubled years to come: let's offer
 our obeisance to the Sage." 176

Then the happy couple, their inner doubts
 quietened, their minds of light
 conscious of their power and direction,
 withdrew from the Ashrama. 177

In the coming weeks, as affairs of State
 came under Rama's notice
 for disposal, he proved more than equal
 to the demands made on him. 178

Brave, handsome, soft-spoken; free from envy,
 anger, pride or resentment;
 Rama had no use for frivolous speech,
 and he was not passion's slave. 179

In the everyday commerce of civic
 life, Rama met the people
 freely, spoke first, spoke in honeyed accents,
 and spoke to friendly effect. 180

He befriended the learned and the wise,
 and was well schooled in Dharma;
 he knew the pulse of the poor, and they too
 found in him a ready friend. 181

Learning in league with wisdom, and prowess
 leavened with pity, Rama's
 excellences made him an exemplar
 of noble princely living. 182

But this daily miracle of Rama's
 many-sided ministry
 as the senior Prince of Ayodhya
 owed a great deal to Sita. 183

She was the Shakti, his necessary
 helpmate, the infallible
 reservoir of his strength, and the central
 inspiration behind him. 184

He saw in her his deeper truer self;
 she shared his thoughts, anxieties,
 dreams, hopes, fears; and he willingly listened
 to her voice of intuition. 185

While he was intimate with Vedic lore
 and knew the ancillaries,
 the arts and the science of war and peace
 found in him a paragon. 186

The scholar, debator and courtier,
 counsellor and justiciar,
 warrior, sportsman and artist made him
 the darling of all the world: 187

and yet 'twas the unqualified backing
 from the Sita ambience,
 the constant link with the pure underground
 waters of the Earth-spirit, 188

this gloried pairing of immaculate
 Purusha with eternal
 Prakriti, 'twas this merging of Powers
 that made the success story. 189

When Rama and Sita visited one
 of the several Temples
 in Ayodhya, they would be lost among
 the converging devotees. 190

By sharing the hopes and aspirations
 of the many, as also
 the pain of deprivation and defeat
 of the inarticulate, 191

Rama and Sita hymned their souls' prayer
 for the desired communion
 with the laggards of the race, and found too
 the key to their redemption. 192

Whenever in the honeyed harmony
 of the Bliss of Existence
 distortions erupt, and aberrations,
 • scissions, alienations, 193

only the deeper poise of the Spirit
 can by its alchemic force
 dissolve the discordances and restore
 the native creative stance. 194

Oftentimes accompanying Rama
 on his tours of the city,
 Sita felt a delegation of trust
 for the voiceless of the earth. 195

They had no need to speak out the saga
of their wants and discontents:
she read them at a glance on their faces,
and her eyes told Rama all. 196

At other times, when they went visiting
the secluded Ashramas
of the ecstasies and the hierophants,
the two were a living soul; 197

and during the long sessions of sustained
exploration of the Self,
together they traversed the world-spiral
from Inconscience to the Light. 198

This never ceasing Ministry of Love
for the people and the State,
sometimes Sita alongside of Rama,
and oft as if on her own, 199

and always held together by the link,
the sense of identity
that makes of marriage a squaring of strengths
and a soaring unity: 200

this incessant prayerful acceptance
of responsibility,
this readiness to be guided in life
by the King and the Elders: 201

the thousand and one acts of tenderness,
courtesy, consideration,
that both humanised Sita and her lord
and made them almost divine: 202

everything they did — or wisely refrained
from doing — raised their credit,
and it seemed proper to hope that Rama
would be crowned as Vicegerent. 203

Canto 15: Voice of the People

King Dasaratha, more and more conscious
of the ravages of age
resolved at last that he would seek release
from the cares of his Office. 204

The eldest and choicest of his four sons,
Rama had in Maithili
a helpmate incomparable and wise,
and everybody loved them. 205

By their unblemished record of service
they had uncannily stood
the test of apprenticeship in kingcraft,
and won golden opinions. 206

While all this was clear to Dasaratha,
before he could unburden
himself of the worries of sovereignty,
he had first to initiate 207

the formal election, to be followed
by the due ritualistic
installation of Rama and Sita
on the throne of Ayodhya. 208

A general assembly was soon convened
comprising princes, prophets
and people's spokesmen, whom the King addressed
in a deep resonant voice: 209

"The Ikshvaku race are a royal line,
and in my own time I've served
my people with unwinking allegiance,
and walked the path of Dharma. 210

But now I face the heavy weight of years,
and finding in my eldest,
Rama, a heir worthy in every way,
I ask for your concurrence. 211

In a matter that concerns the welfare
of the whole commonalty,
not my preference, but your united
approbation must decide." 212

A burst of universal rejoicing
 greeted the King's announcement,
 and 'twas like the clamour of the peacocks
 welcoming the dark rain-cloud. 213

"O King! you've ruled us ably and for long,"
 the congregation declared
 with one voice; "it's now time to consecrate
 Rama as your Vicegerent. 214

With his adhesion to Dharma, and his
 reliance on Maithili,
 Rama will be protector of the Realm
 and Father of the People." 215

Feeling o'erjoyed by the people's response,
 the King desired Vasishta
 and Vamadeva to take steps forthwith
 for Rama's installation. 216

It was the month of Chaitra, and the woods
 were in blossom, and the earth
 smiled everywhere, and an expectancy
 filled the very atmosphere. 217

Translating the King's wish, the two High Priests
 gave instructions regarding
 the ceremony of installation
 during Pushya next morning. 218

And orders were given for varied grains,
 high canopies with pennons,
 sumptuous garlands and sacred waters,
 mango leaves and plantain trees. 219

The King now sent for Rama, and apprised
 him of the people's resolve;
 and the assembled citizens cheered him,
 for their dream was coming true. 220

Now the Assembly dispersed with feelings
 of exultation and joy,
 but the King, calling Rama to his room,
 confided his anxieties: 221

"I deem it fit that the coronation
 be done expeditiously,
 and at a time Bharata is away;
 you'll thus be crowned tomorrow. 222

I would ask you and Maithili to fast
tonight, rest on the bare ground
covered with *kusa* grass, and lie waking
in a deep prayerful mood. 223

While you are engaged in this askesis,
let Lakshmana and others
guard your chamber with all possible care
and preserve you two from harm." 224

Having signified his silent consent
and offered his obeisance,
Rama hastened to Mother Kausalya's
place to receive her blessings. 225

Sumitra was there already having
heard the news, and Lakshmana
had followed, and Sita had joined them too,
word having been sent to her. 226

But Kausalya robed in the purest white
sat unconscious of the rest,
withdrawn for Rama's good in self-absorbed
meditation on the Lord. 227

Now as he made obeisance, she opened
her eyes, saw, and heard him say:
"It is my father's desire I should be
consecrated Vicegerent. 228

I'm asked to fast with Vaidehi tonight
and prepare for tomorrow's
ceremony: Mother, tell me the things
Maithili and I should do." 229

Tearful and tremulous with her deep sense
of climactic fulfilment,
Kausalya said: "Raghava, my child, may
long life and all joy be yours. 230

As for the discipline of fast tonight
and prayerful vigilance,
our preceptor Vasishta would meet you
and give precise instructions." 231

Taking leave of his mothers, Kausalya
and Sumitra, and assured
of Lakshmana's support, Raghava left
for his mansion with Sita. 232

High Priest Vasishtha was there to meet them
 as requested by the King,
 and spelt out the minutiae concerning
 the prescribed ritual fast. 233

When Vasishtha left, Rama and Sita
 bathed and prayed, poured oblations
 in the blazing fire, and shared the remains
 of the consecrated food. 234

Then spreading *kusa* grass on the bare ground,
 Rama and Maithili lay
 on it avoiding speech, and were lost in
 a trance of meditation. 235

In the meantime, all over Ayodhya's
 thoroughfares, cross-roads, bylanes,
 men accosted one another, and shared
 the joyous news of the day. 236

Citizens gathered in little clusters
 in the streets, and exchanged news
 about the ensuing coronation
 and heightened the festive air. 237

In hushed whispers people talked of the night's
 vigil and ritual fast,
 of the incandescent light in Sita's
 eyes as she stood by Rama, 238

of the aura of pure felicity
 that surrounded Kausalya
 as she pronounced her sweet benedictions
 on Rama and Maithili, 239

of Dasaratha's trembling happiness,
 although marred by nervousness
 and a strange unpredictability
 of mien and mood and method. 240

And there weren't wanting a few here and there
 commenting on Bharata's
 absence in Kekaya and the patent
 haste behind the proceedings. 241

'Twas ir conceivable that Bharata,
 had he remained, would have felt
 otherwise than happy beyond measure
 at Rama's coronation! 242

Thus the habitual suspicion-mongers
 questioning the suddenness
of the resolve, and the hugger-mugger
 style of the preparations. 243

But the common heave of hope and surmise
 saw in Rama and Sita
the God-given trustees of the Kingdom
 for the dawning Golden Age. 244

Canto 16: **The Crookback and Kaikeyi**

- Like tens of thousands of the citizens
of Ayodhya who partook
of the great excitement of that evening
as it merged into the night, 245
- the hunchback Manthara, crooked in mind
as she was warped in her soul,
and misshapen and stunted in body,
she too was caught with the rest. 246
- She breathed at once the exhilarating
air, and felt a nippiness,
an exceptional buoyancy, a feel
and taste of the wonderful. 247
- It was her nature to feel allergic
to all that was auspicious,
and with a dyspeptic's sharp reaction
she recoiled from the gaiety. 248
- And it didn't take her long to sniff about
with a keen suspicious look
and discover the reason for the night's
thrust of festive rejoicing. 249
- What traumatic childhood experience,
what knotted mole of nature
or what frozen debit of frustration
gave the push to her actions? 250
- Of obscure origin, she had been nurse
and woman in attendance
and confidante to Kaikeyi, and had
followed her to Ayodhya. 251
- There she had dwelt apart with a cringing
and possessive smile for her
royal mistress, and a hardly concealed
scowl for everybody else. 252
- That Kausalya's son — and not Kaikeyi's
would be installed Vicegerent
hit her in the stomach, and the hunchback
yelled within and swore an oath: 253

"Really! You couldn't have brought me better news,"
said Kaikeyi with relief;

"I'm o'erjoyed, for Bharata and Rama
are the same to me, the same." 264

"Same, O witless one!" Manthara shot back;
can't you see it's not Rama,
but Kausalya, will lord it over you?
And what a shame, Kaikeyi! 265

Recall, how oft, in your pride of beauty,
you've slighted and insulted
Kausalya the respected Senior Queen
and taken her for granted! 266

Ah, you relied on your absolute hold
on the uxorious King:
but see, the old fox has double-crossed you,
and sacrificed your future!" 267

Even more than the words, the serpent-eyes
of the swaggering hunchback
struck responsive fire, and Kaikeyi rose
like an incited cobra. 268

Seizing the crookback in a quick embrace,
the Queen rather moaned than spoke:
"What a miserable fool I have been!
But tell me what I should do." 269

Manthara glowed visibly as she said:
"Ah, now you are sane again.
It's simple, and all it asks for is grit,
aye, a stony stubbornness. 270

Tell him: 'Redeem the boons you gave, O King:
make Bharata Vicegerent
tomorrow, and let Rama be exiled
to the woods for fourteen years'." 271

"Ah, you've opened my eyes," cried Kaikeyi;
"ah, my swan-gaited charming
humpback, O my darling saviour humpback,
I'll put down Kausalya still. 272

Let him come, the doddering deceitful
King: I'll sulk, I'll rave, I'll rage,
I'll ask that Bharata be crowned, and I'll
ask that Rama be exiled. 273

My resourceful crookback, my glamorous
humpback, my best of hunchbacks:
oh hump of cunning, wisdom and statecraft:
how I'm beholden to you!" 274

Crowing on her quick success, the crookback
advised her mistress about
the tactics and the longer strategy,
and Kaikeyi quite succumbed. 275

All was fair now, and she would be ruthless
indeed, and give no quarter
to reason, pity, human decency —
she must simply have her way! 276

Yes, as advised by the wily hunchback,
Kaikeyi would shed at once
all brightness and colour of jewellery
and clothes, and opt for the dark. 277

Aye, she would retreat to her sob-chamber,
she'd lie sprawled on the bare ground
wailing and whimpering, as if indeed
the worst mourning became her! 278

And so when Dasaratha, late at night,
reached her suite as was his wont,
he learnt she had retired in high dudgeon
to her Chamber of Protest. 279

The news unnerved the patriarchal King,
and he rushed to the Dark Room
in the unleashed agony of suspense
and fear of fatality. 280

Taking in at once the depressing scene
of the Queen lost in sinful
self-abuse, the sinless aged monarch
felt chilled by the reception. 281

What was this startling omen sinister
that threatened to tumble down
with one lethal stroke the great edifice
of the future he had planned! 282

Between the intended coronation
and the accomplished event,
what sinister shadows, what frightful gales,
may not cross and cause defeat! 283

Night is cover for hatching strategems,
 night is the season of rest
and renewal, and night is the mystic
 cave for askesis and Light!

Canto 17: The Great Renunciation

After the night's vigil and blissful peace
Rama and Sita got up
to the music of the minstrels, and 'twas
the fair hour before the Dawn. 285

In an atmosphere of expectancy
and hope abounding, they bathed,
attired themselves in silk, offered prayers,
and received Vedic blessings. 286

Dawn over Ayodhya seemed to predict
a day of splendid bliss,
and in their heady anticipation.
the citizens beamed with joy. 287

Ayodhya with its temples and broad streets,
the stately palatial mansions,
the public squares filling with visitors
from Kosala's countryside: 288

a bustle of hectic activity
in the royal Guest Houses
where invited dignitaries recalled
Dasaratha's achievements: 289

and Nature—the wondrous munificence
of the elements, the Sun,
and sky, and wind, and Sarayu's sweet flow—
seemed to smile on the future. 290

The hour after sunrise saw Ayodhya,
the best of cities, now more
than ever well swept and watered, and decked
with arches, bunting, flowers. 291

The shops dazzled, with their glittering show
of attractive goods; the air
was heavy with incense; and everywhere
people talked of the event. 292

And from his Ashrama on the outskirts,
Vasishtha arrived in time;
and assembled already were the limbs
of the great ceremony: 293

- sacred waters in pots from the rivers;
 the holy Chair made of fig;
 chariot, umbrella, the lion-throne;
 the sword, the bow, the quiver; 294
- a variety of birds, beasts, grains, flowers;
 plenty of milk, curd, honey,
 an ensemble of gems, maids, preceptors;
 and the well-lit Sacred Fire. 295
- Approving the arrangements, Vasishta
 wanted the King to be told
 that the auspicious hour was approaching
 and the function should begin. 296
- Indeed, the spacious Coronation Hall
 was filled already with guests -
 the visiting Kings, Rishis and minstrels
 who were getting impatient. 297
- The trusted charioteer, Sumantra,
 entering the King's chamber,
 made known respectfully the anxiety
 of Vasishta and the guests. 298
- But the King's demeanour was pitiful
 to behold, for verily
 he was like a sick man mumbling under
 the grip of delirium; 299
- or he lay sullen, immobile, half-dead,
 like an aged king-cobra,
 once the pride of the race, now mesmerised
 by a ruthless snake-charmer. 300
- The King was a picture of misery,
 his eyes were bloodshot, he seemed
 a prisoner of self-wrought helplessness,
 and 'twas Kaikeyi who spoke: 301
- "Sumantra, the King is tired on account
 of sleeplessness; in his name
 I ask you to get Rama here at once:
 the King has something to say." 302
- In deep dejection, Sumantra retired
 with bowed head, and went along
 crowded and festive Kingsway to Rama's
 magnificent residence. 303

Having alighted from the chariot
in the innermost courtyard,
Sumantra passed the throng of visitors
and sought Rama's audience. 304

Seeing the Prince seated by Sita's side
on a luxurious couch,
and adorned in appropriate measure
and radiant like a god, 305

Sumantra bowed deeply and said: "Rama,
Kausalya's beloved son!
the King your father and Queen Kaikeyi
desire to see you at once." 306

When Rama sought Sita's leave to follow
Sumantra, she rose to say:
"Vicegerent today, may you qualify
for Rajasuya as well! 307

As you perform that noble Sacrifice
wearing the choicest deer-skin
and taking the due ceremonial vows,
by your side, Rama, I'll be. 308

Indra in the East, Yama in the South,
great Varuna in the West,
and Kubera in the North: may the Four
protect you always from harm!" 309

Assuring Sita that all would be well
and armed with her good wishes,
Rama came out followed by Sumantra,
and Lakshmana joined them too. 310

As the three speeded in the chariot
along Kingsway, a loud burst
of rejoicing rose from the citizens
lauding Rama and Sita. 311

Seizing that bright morning its bracing air,
Ayodhya's citizen filled
the mainstreets and greeted their Royal Prince;
and he wished them back in turn. 312

Hadn't it been said: "One who doesn't see Rama
or one whom Rama doesn't see,
such a hapless one is censured by all,
and his own soul condemns him!" 313

Having driven through the admiring crowds,
 they arrived at the Palace,
 and Rama hurried to the gynaeceum
 and beheld his noble Sire. 314

But 'twas the ghost of his father he saw
 seated there, with Kaikeyi
 as assertive and haughty as ever,
 sharing the luxury couch. 315

In burning anguish Rama touched the King's
 feet, and bowed to Kaikeyi,
 but the wretched King's eyes were wet with tears
 and he merely moaned 'Rama!' 316

A grim terror seemed to clutch at the Prince
 as though he had unawares
 stepped on a snake, and the listless King caused
 a depression of spirits. 317

Regaining his self-possession, Rama
 asked the Queen: "Why is Father
 silent and sad, how have I displeased him,—
 or have *you* hurt his feelings?" 318

Kaikeyi coolly answered: "He's not sad,
 and you haven't hurt him; only,
 having made me a promise years ago,
 now like a man uncultured, 319

or a mere commoner, he's unwilling
 to redeem his plighted word.
 But it is within your power, Rama,
 to honour your Father's word." 320

Rama said simply: "I'll do what he wants;
 this is truth and the whole truth.
 If he asked me to jump into the fire,
 or quaff deadliest poison, 321

or drown myself in the heaving ocean,
 I would do it readily.
 How could you, Mother, have entertained doubts
 about my prompt compliance? 322

It is for my Guru and great well-wisher,
 the King, to tell me his mind:
 Rama's not the double-tongued one who says
 one thing, and fails in action. 323

I give this assurance, Mother: I am
 man of one word, and archer
 whose first dart attains its aim, and husband
 who prizes his only wife." 324

Perceptibly relieved, Kaikeyi said:
 "Once after a fierce battle
 your Father lay wounded, and I nursed him,
 and he granted me two boons. 325

I asked for his redeeming them today:
 first, Bharata should be made
 Vicegerent; second, you should be exiled
 to the woods for fourteen years. 326

O Rama, you can honour the King's word
 by relinquishing the crown
 and living in Dandaka for nine years
 and five, as an anchorite." 327

The murderous cold matter-of-factness
 of Kaikeyi's recital
 hardly touched Rama's equanimity,
 and he made answer at once: 328

"This is no great matter, I will obey;
 let Bharata be sent for,
 and I'll live in the woods for fourteen years
 with deer-skin and matted locks." 329

The grave and awesome immobility
 of Raghava's countenance
 daunted Kaikeyi, and with a flutter
 of disquiet she remarked: 330

"Rama, you needn't wait till Bharata comes,
 that will be time-consuming;
 go at once, for till you leave, your Father
 will not bathe, nor take his food." 331

Thus urged to instant action, Rama gave
 this firm heroic reply:
 "Devi! my Father's will is my Dharma,
 and I'll do it, no question: 332

I'm concerned that Father should look so pale,
 so dazed, so miserable;
 but although he has himself said nothing,
 your word is enough for me. 333

I'll now meet my Mother and receive her
 blessings, and take leave of her;
 then speak a few parting words to Sita
 and depart for Dandaka. 334

But the King needn't have made you his proxy;
 or on your own you could have
 asked me, without invoking the old boons
 and distressing the good King. 335

Lady, not for *preyas* or the world's goods
 I care, but like the Rishis,
 only for *sreyas*, the imperatives
 of the straight path of Dharma." 336

Hearing this heroic pledge, the old King
 broke down and wailed piteously;
 but Rama, taking leave of them, came out
 with the aura of the Sun. 337

He gave no sign he had any regrets:
 neither the loss of the Crown
 nor the sentence of exile to the woods
 could touch his poise in the least. 338

While Lakshmana, shocked by the reversal
 in Rama's fortunes, was seized
 with a cold fury beyond description,
 Rama remained unruffled. 339

He was no slave to the glories of State —
 carriage, umbrella, fly-whisk —
 and preferred to walk like a commoner
 with a granite self-control. 340

No Vicegerent now, only an exile;
 still his serene face retained
 its old radiance, while the sky within
 was a cloudless indigo. 341

Tranquil was his mind like the consciousness
 of a liberated soul;
 and as if beyond the dualities,
 he was master of himself. 342

But although Rama's soul was like a star
 and wore its own crown of Truth,
 the consequence of Kaikeyi's boons
 were pretty catastrophic. 343

Like a lethal explosion releasing
 reverberent reactions,
 Kaikeyi's ego-burst unleashed total
 confusion in Ayodhya. 344

Word went round quickly, and rumour spread gales,
 and everybody soon knew
 about the hunchback's role in transforming
 the Queen into a fury. 345

How fast the venom of the news had spread
 to agitate the people,
 like fell poison coursing through a body
 stung by a vicious scorpion! 346

People talked freely of the wicked wretch
 and her flair for crookedness,
 of Kaikeyi's stark inhumanity
 and the King's senility. 347

The women of Ayodhya with one voice
 bemoaned the turn in affairs,
 and their hearts went out to Queen Kausalya
 and the princess, Maithili. 348

Meanwhile, attaining his unsuspecting
 Mother's place, Rama apprised
 the long-suffering Kausalya about
 the double-blow dealt to him: 349

"It will be terrible for you, Mother,
 and Sita and Lakshmana:
 I'm exiled to Dandaka; Bharata
 will be crowned Yuva Raja." 350

For the great lady seated in prayer
 and offering oblations
 to the Mystic Fire, the words Rama spoke
 had the effect of thunder. 351

Recovering, as Rama lifted her,
 Kausalya said: "Far better
 I had remained sterile than that I should
 bear you only to lose you! 352

Having faced a thousand indignities
 from the King and Kaikeyi
 with her constant scowl, I centered all thoughts,
 hopes and dreams in you alone. 353

These ten and seven years since you were born
 you've been the prop of my life,
 and as I cannot die before my time
 I'll come with you to the woods." 354

As Lakshmana saw the consequences
 of Kaikeyi's handiwork,
 a fierce transformation came over him,
 and he seemed to emit flames. 355

His agitated frame, tense with anger,
 almost trembled like a thing
 unsteady, tempestuous, ominous,
 and terrible to behold. 356

Fretting and fuming with deep resentment
 Lakshmana now exploded:
 "Wrong, wrong, what the King has done, driven by
 evil-minded Kaikeyi! 357

By right the Kingdom is Rama's; and I'll
 by force help him to seize it!
 It's not right we acquiesce in adharma;
 if need be, I'll kill the King!" 358

This wild incendiary speech both shocked and
 pained Kausalya all the more,
 but Rama begged that she should permit him
 to redeem his Father's word. 359

Turning to Lakshmana, Rama pleaded
 that Dharma not violence
 should determine their actions, and the King
 their Father must be retrieved. 360

No matter how it happened, their Father
 felt bound, and it was Rama's
 Dharma to redeem the word and thereby
 sustain the moral order. 361

And his mother, Kausalya, how could she
 follow Rama to the woods?
 Her place was clearly with the King, and there
 could be no running away: 362

"It's wrong to suppose that the rejection
 of Dharma can lead to good;
 it's by sustaining Dharma that we come
 to be sustained by Dharma. 363

Aye, Dharma is the ground of Existence,
 and any conscious turning
 away from its imperatives must make
 the very foundations crack." 364

And Rama added: "Listen, Lakshmana:
 there are indefinable
 mysterious Powers that obscurely
 take a hand in our affairs. 365

Wasn't Kaikeyi kind to us all along?
 Why, then, the present ill-will?
 We're in the grip of some unknown forces,
 and anger is no answer. 366

Let us, therefore, hold back our resentment,
 view things soberly, wisely,
 generate a mood of calm acceptance
 and submit to the Divine." 367

But neither the heart-broken Kausalya
 nor the incensed Lakshmana
 was to become easily reconciled
 to the double injustice. 368

While Lakshmana still raged, and Kausalya
 still wished to share the exile,
 Rama's persuasive pleading and high
 integrity won at last. 369

Unable to alter her son's resolve,
 Kausalya was now content
 to shower on him a Mother's blessings
 as a shield for the future: 370

"Go now, if you must, but return safely
 having carried out your vow.
 May the weapons Visvamitra gave you
 defend you infallibly. 371

May the gods and all other celestials
 give you unstinted support;
 may the seasons, the processionary
 months and days, smile upon you. 372

May the elements, the stars in the sky,
 may the seven great Sages,
 the worthy Rishis, the sylvan deities,
 may all preserve you from harm!" 373

Then she dropped sanctified rice on his head,
gave him a talisman-herb,
embraced and blessed him with a trembling voice,
and let him take leave of her. 374

Almost wrenching himself from his Mother's
embrace, he made obeisance,
circumambulated, and sped along
Kingsway towards his own house. 375

Canto 18: Sita has Her Way

And while the shattering news was being
bruited about everywhere,
it had not yet reached Maithili in her
inviolable rooms within. 376

Thus when she espied Rama at long last,
so grave and drained of colour,
so devoid of his native springy air,
she cried like a wounded bird: 377

“What, what has happened, my Lord? What has gone
awry beyond redemption?
The Pushya constellation awaits us—
but your face proclaims defeat. 378

Where are the minstrels and panegyrists,
where are the Veda singers,
where are the pots of milk, curd and honey,
where’s the royal umbrella?” 379

He had known no pain, no inner struggle
when he met Kaikeyi’s claims
with a ready Yes, for he thought only
of his own predilection. 380

His Father’s honour was to be redeemed
by his own abnegation:
this he could do, being poised in his soul
and he won the nobler crown. 381

But as he saw more and more poignantly
how his renunciation
affected his mother, brother and wife,
he felt uneasy and sad. 382

He could also imagine how the rest—
the princes, priests and people
who had been fed on great expectations—
would react to the event. 383

No wonder it was on a subdued key
Rama spoke to Vaidehi:
“Caught in the meshes of Dharma, the King
names Bharata Vicegerent, 384

- and exiles me to Dandaka forest
for a term of fourteen years.
If you, Janaka's daughter, cannot see
the light of Dharma, who can? 385
- With matted hair and deer-skin, I shall leave
for the forest presently.
What can I say except urge that you should
act the brave woman you are, 386
- show proper respect to the aged King,
due regard to Bharata,
love to my Mother, and bear cheerfully
the strain of separation." 387
- The formal lifeless manner of his speech,
its measured formulations
and its veiling of concern by worldly
wisdom, all hurt Maithili. 388
- She felt indignant that he should be so
causal, even callous,
about the exile and separation,
and her speech was tipped with fire: 389
- "What feckless words are these you have spoken
am I to laugh, or to weep?
With your worthy warrior stance and name,
how could you speak so stalely? 390
- Is't right you take me, your wife, for granted
and talk of separation?
Hasn't Kaikeyi, demanding your exile,
decreed my exile as well? 391
- As well separate the Sun from his rays,
the shadow from the object,
or expect a swan from a mountain lake
to wallow in a gutter! 392
- It suddenly comes back to me, Rama,
with a burning sensation:
the dream I often had in Mithila
figuring me in exile. 393
- Aye, the dangled fruit, and the bitter dish:
and all the nameless terrors,
and the infinite credit of romance
lying coiled in the dark woods! 394

For a wife, there's neither father, mother,
son, friend, but her Lord alone:
she shares his life as much in foul weather
as in fair, and all the time. 395

Must you leave for the dark forest today?
I'll take precedence, and walk
ahead of you making easy your path,
and ever at your service. 396

I'm sinless, and my father Janaka,
my mother too, have taught me
how, shadow-like, I should always partake
of your life's vicissitudes. 397

Stark forest life has no terrors for me,
and indeed I'll be happy
as in my father's home in Mithila,
and find my felicity. 398

With you, Rama, by my side, Dandaka
were Paradise enough, and
I'll share all, suffer all, and distil joy
from even our woodland life." 399

'Twas now clear to Rama that, not the missed
coronation, but the threat
of severance from him consequent on
the exile, that pained Sita. 400

Rama therefore took pains to picturise
the dangers of forest life:
the lions roaring from their mountain-lairs,
rivers full of crocodiles; 401

the rugged, thorny or slushy pathways,
the huge elephants in rut,
the frightening fauna of the forest,
the din of the cataracts! 402

And for anchorites forest life would mean
a medley of privations,
and the dread proximity of pythons,
spiders, snakes and scorpions. 403

Such fright talk, more appropriate to scare
a child away than deter
an adult person, hardly moved Sita
who promptly renewed her plea: 404

“You’ve but painted one side of the picture,
 but there’s another side too,
 and I’ll now limn the favourable hues,
 and you can judge for yourself. 405

What if there be the jungle’s denizens,
 tigers, lions, oxen, stags,
 and the rest: at your o’erpowering sight
 they’ll fly, and make themselves scarce. 406

And remember, Rama, I am sprung from
 a wooden ploughshare’s furrow,
 and Earth-born as I am, I can rough out
 the perils of forest life. 407

Besides, while still young in years, I had heard
 soothsayers and ascetics
 prophesying I was fated to live
 for some years in the forest. 408

Don’t you see here the hand of the Unknown,
 your exile being the means
 of fulfilment of my own destiny?
 Hesitate no more, my Lord!” 409

As Rama was unpersuaded yet,
 and while declining but tried
 to mollify her into submission,
 Sita almost blurted out: 410

“My father, Janaka of Mithila,
 surely chose a man as my
 husband, not a woman in man’s image!
 What fear governs you, my Lord? 411

Remember I’m like Sati Savitri
 who shadowed her Satyavan;
 what, having married me, would you leave me
 in the care of another? 412

Talk you of the rugged forest pathways?
 the perils of woodland life?
 or of stones piercing and burning the feet
 as if touched by molten wax? 413

But for me, Rama, all this is nothing
 when squarely balanced against
 the utter horror of separation
 from you my dear plight Lord. 414

'Tis true I'm used to the comforts of life
in a great princely mansion:
first in Mithila where I lacked nothing
and later in Ayodhya. 415

But remember too, my lord and lover,
I'm King Janaka's daughter,
and he didn't flinch, aye, even when he heard
that his palace was on fire! 416

It is not the feeble form that you see,
nor the stale traditional
superstition of feminine frailty,
that's the truth of the matter. 417

For the apparently humblest woman,
weakest, most expendable
as others may think, still dares death itself
when from her new Life issues. 418

And I can certainly say for myself
that there's lodged deep within me
a secret potentiality of will
that may explode any time. 419

Let me come with you like your own shadow
for, after all, that's the wife's
allotted role, as my Father himself
stated, giving me to you. 420

This, my lord, this popular assumption
that we're but Doll's House creatures
foolishly engrossed in colourful clothes
and glittering jewellery, 421

happily contained by domestic chores,
the securities of home
and boudoir, and the throes of child-bearing
• and rearing, is mere fancy. 422

If as the partaker of your Dharma
I've the right to share your throne,
why, it follows, I must with equal joy
feel the thorns of exile too. 423

No cheap juvenile enthusiasm, this,
nor female obstinacy:
I've been schooled in Mithila's famed Retreats
in seasoned austerities. 424

Rama, Rama, don't you see in all this
 drastic reversal of things —
 the missed coronation, the forced exile —
 some remote control at work? 425

What the King had promised, what Kaikeyi
 on the ego's thrust has asked
 for fulfilment, can make a moving Song,
 but we don't see the Minstrel. 426

Somewhere afar off, some aeons ago,
 some events must have unleashed
 a spiral of causality, and now
 we're caught in its gyrations. 427

The synoptic view comprehends at once
 the receding darkened nights
 and the beckoning noons of the future:
 such is integral vision. 428

Let me come with you, for that's my desire
 and the divine intention;
 what else is to happen rests with the gods,
 and let's put our trust in them. 429

I care not for Bharata's protection,
 my place is with you alone;
 the woods cannot scare me, harm me, tire me,
 baffle me, or sicken me. 430

I'll know, with you by my side, how to make
 mere woodland my true heaven
 be it the worst of hells; and I will learn
 to find good in everything. 431

For us who are masters of our senses
 and passions, exile offers
 no risks, and centered in mutual love
 we can live a blissful life. 432

And let me say again that life with you
 is heaven; without you, hell;
 if you will not take me with you today,
 I'll just drink poison and die." 433

Thus her burning uncontrollable grief
 found vehement expression
 in her speech, her tears flowed in torrents, and
 her face was bleached of colour. 434

Overcome by her misery, Rama
 took her in his protective
 arms, spoke words of solace and endearment
 and ended her misgivings: 435

“I’ve no choice, Vaidehi, but to redeem
 my revered Father’s promise,
 and this means my exile to the forest;
 but you too shall come with me. 436

My Sita of perfect limbs, destiny
 has marked you for forest life;
 let’s, then, face life together relying
 on Truth, Faith and Love alone. 437

Also, since we’ve opted for forest life,
 let’s give away our valued
 possessions like cows, silks, gems, gold, silver,
 and let the worthy have them.” 438

The happy outcome of the argument
 between Sita and Rama
 moved Lakshmana too to seek permission
 to follow them to the woods: 439

“Since you now seem resolved on forest life,
 allow me to go with you:
 bow in hand, I can clear the path for you
 and render constant service. 440

My presence isn’t needed here, as perhaps
 you think, to watch Kausalya
 and Sumitra, lest Kaikeyi injure
 their interests yet further. 441

I believe Bharata will act fairly,
 or I’ll know the reason why;
 and our mothers have their own retainers
 who will rise in their defence. 442

The sole religion I know is service
 to you and Sita; and now
 with bow and arrow, and spade and basket,
 I’ll ease forest life for you.” 443

Rama had no option but to acquiesce,
 and now the three gave away
 their wealth and belongings to the worthy,
 the poor and the dependants. 444

The wise ones and the disprivileged ones,
the many loyal women,
the retainers and companions, friends old
and new, all went satisfied.

Canto 19: Journey to Chitrakūta

Now with a rare effulgence on his face
Rama the Great Renouncer,
flanked by dazzling Sita and Saumitri,
was ready for the journey. 446

As they were going on foot on Kingsway,
people spoke in hushed whispers
condemning Kaikeyi and the old King
and scenting a grim future. 447

Having meanwhile reached the royal Presence,
Rama begged leave to begin
his exile attended, as desired, by
Maithili and Saumitri. 448

In desperation, the King suggested
that Rama should seize the throne;
or that all Ayodhya's dwellers and wealth
should accompany Rama. 449

But the Prince firmly answered: "No coward
escape routes for me, Father;
you're still the King, and the army, people,
wealth remain with you alone. 450

And, again, of what use will the army,
treasure or retainers be
when Sita, Lakshmana and I wander
as anchorites in the woods?" 451

By now Vasishtha and the other Priests,
the Queens and the Ministers,
all were gathered in the Audience Hall,
and few pairs of eyes were dry. 452

Many glared at grim Kaikeyi, as though
she were the agent of Doom;
but neither pleadings nor castigations
had any effect on her. 453

And she had ready deer-skin and tree-bark
for the use of the exiles,
and wanted even Sita to wear them,
but Vasishtha ruled it out: 454

“Heartless woman! unwomanly monster!
 Sita’s exile was not part
 of the bond; she goes of her own accord,
 and may wear what pleases her.” 455

Taking the hint, Dasaratha ordered
 that raiment and ornaments
 enough for fourteen long years of exile
 should be given to Sita. 456

In the confusion of the leave-taking
 there were tableaux of all kinds,
 moments of pathos and high poignancy,
 even the sheerly sublime. 457

Tearful Mandavi took Sita aside
 and said: “I know Bharata;
 he’ll reject the crown, disown his mother,
 and exile himself as well.” 458

Srutakirti, more sanguine, confided:
 “I’ll take care of your parrot,
 and feed it, and teach the creature to say:
 ‘Sita is coming today!’” 459

When Lakshmana took leave of Urmila,
 she merely said: “I will wait,
 and fourteen years will be like fourteen days;
 let me be no drag on you!” 460

And Sumitra, sage and serious, said:
 “Now Rama is your father,
 Maithili is myself your mother, and
 Dandaka is Ayodhya.” 461

While Dasaratha, driven to the brink
 of desperation, spluttered
 distractedly, alternating between
 bleak nights and deceptive dawns, 462

Rama seized a moment to tell the King
 that he should show due regard
 to the angelic Kausalya, who had
 suffered so much already. 463

Kausalya herself, embracing Sita,
 commended her loyalty,
 love and devotion even in those times
 of chilling adversity. 464

“Where’s the Veena’s music without its strings?”

Sita asked; “Without its wheels,
can a chariot move? And torn from my
husband, where’s the life for me?” 465

And all the time, while the grim Kaikeyi
stood her ground as one soulless
and even lifeless, some were outspoken
in their bitter revilement. 466

Not the King and Sage Vasishta alone:
Sumantra too, who rated
Kaikeyi for being quite as heartless
as her Kekaya mother! 467

Yes, hadn’t that self-willed woman demanded
that, at the risk of his life,
her Lord should pamper her petty desire,
and thus hastened her own end? 468

And groups of men and women from a great
distance glared at her as though
they would, if they could, disintegrate her
into invisibility. 469

Now suddenly Rama’s voice rose above
the buzz and din of the place:
“Elders, brothers, mothers, sisters! Forgive
our trespasses if any. 470

We may have, perhaps inadvertently,
spoken harshly or behaved
foolishly, but now that we are going,
forget, and wish us godspeed!” 471

The words so sincere and so apposite
wrung tears from the assembled,
the ladies most of all, and the packed Hall
resounded with their wailing. 472

Presently, as directed by the King,
Sumantra had a horse-drawn
carriage ready, and well-adorned Sita
climbed into it first with ease. 473

Then Lakshmana placed in the chariot
the bows and arrows and all
their celestial weaponry, as also
the baskets and pickaxes. 474

Now Rama and Lakshmana too got in,
 even as a thousand eyes
 converged upon the three and grew misty
 and moist, and tears flowed freely. 475

But Sumantra, hardening his heart, spurred
 his horses into a run,
 and the journey from Ayodhya began
 towards frontiers unknown. 476

The carriage raced ahead, but men, women
 and children, pushed by their grief,
 lurched forward and tried at least to restrain
 the gallop of the horses. 477

While the citizens cried frantically
 'Stop, Sumantra, stop!', Rama
 urged him 'Faster, faster!', and no wonder
 the pace of progress was slow. 478

Gnawed by grief, the King himself scrambled out
 and Kausalya with him, and
 they tried to o'ertake the chariot, and
 have a glimpse of the children. 479

But Rama couldn't bear the sight of Father
 and Mother trailing like this,
 and asked Sumantra to drive yet faster
 and end the grim agony. 480

Checkmated, Dasaratha stood as long
 as possible on the road,
 straining to see the disappearing car
 till he just slumped on the ground. 481

Sighting Kaikeyi, he spurned her at once,
 neither wife nor kin was she;
 and he desired to be conveyed only
 to Queen Kausalya's chambers: 482

"At different times, answering the need
 of the moment, Kausalya
 has been my Queen, Beloved, companion,
 mother, sister, servant, nurse. 483

Woe is me that I should have long ignored
 this paragon of good speech
 and unblemished behaviour in favour
 of the monster, Kaikeyi!" 484

And yet, for all the speed of the horses,
 other ardent citizens
 of Ayodhya trailed the chariot far,
 far beyond the city gates. 485

What love and devotion beyond compare,
 thought Rama as he surveyed
 the throng of citizens coming behind
 the fast-driven chariot. 486

He tried to reason with them but in vain,
 and in their turn they appealed
 to the horses not to carry away
 their well-beloved Rama. 487

In answer, all three got down from the car
 and walked on foot for a while;
 this meant mutual commiseration,
 but didn't resolve the issue. 488

Reaching the river, Tamasa, fatigue
 overcame the travellers
 and deep slumber claimed them; the horses too
 rolled on the ground with relief. 489

When past midnight, Rama asked Sumantra
 to adopt a cunning ruse
 and persevere with the journey, leaving
 the tired citizens behind. 490

Sumantra first conveyed his charge across
 the river, returned and drove
 towards the North awhile, then back again,
 to continue the journey. 491

With Ayodhya's citizens thus thrown off
 the scent, Rama, Maithili
 and Saumitri were set firmly towards
 the southern forest reaches. 492

The chariot sped through the villages
 crossing various rivers —
 Vēdasruti, Gōmati, Syandikā —
 and Kosala's frontier. 493

And there lay stretched out the penitential
 Naimisa forest, the home
 of Sages from immemorial times
 and seat of Sacrifices. 494

What mysterious and compelling lure
 drew these denizens of Light
 from the city's manifold attractions
 to the ardours of the woods? 495

Perhaps the inner continents of Light
 far transcended the outer,
 and the taste of Infinity rendered
 all else quite nugatory. 496

But for Sita, her Lord, and Saumitri,
 while the uncharted Unknown
 threw its tentacles of fascination,
 an inner unease remained. 497

The travellers felt sad they were leaving
 Ayodhya with its river,
 Sarayū, the Kosala countryside
 and the whole Kingdom behind. 498

"O gem among cities!" Rama exclaimed;
 "I must now take leave of you,
 but when my vow is fulfilled, I'll return
 for the joy of reunion. 499

Ah kindly sincere rural folk! your love
 is selfless and beyond praise:
 go back to your homes, I'll surely return
 and find joy in your welfare." 500

And now the chariot hastened towards
 the benevolent Ganga
 and the riverside spotted with arbours,
 Ashramas and pleasure-haunts. 501

The view of the Ganga opened vistas
 of the racial memory,
 and past and present, and all the three worlds,
 merged in the revelation. 502

A river with mythic antecedents
 interwoven with the lives
 of gods, Gandharvas, Asuras and men,
 Ganga was herself divine. 503

She was like the perennial feminine,
 the foam her white teeth and smile,
 the winding course her braid of hair, the peal
 of waters her loud laughter: 504

and chameleonic her varied moods,
 her flow, now like music sweet,
 anon like a tempest, and again like
 the ineffable sublime: 505

dark and miry here, and crystalline there,
 holy, fair and glamorous,
 the favoured of lotuses, swans and cranes,
 the sinless and jewelled one! 506

On Rama's suggestion, they decided
 to rest under a huge tree
 rear the banks of the river, and indeed
 it was a delightful place. 507

They were now met with due ceremony
 by Guha the hunter-chief
 of Sringerapuram, by which name
 the entire region was known. 508

They were tested friends, Rama and Guha,
 and the chieftain offered choice
 hospitality to his royal guests,
 though Rama suavely declined: 509

they were to live, he said, like ascetics
 and subsist on fruits and roots;
 but the heart's welcome Guha had given
 was richer than the richest. 510

Guha understood, and helped Lakshmana
 the whole night to keep guard o'er
 Rama and Sita as they took their rest
 under the *ingudi* tree. 511

When they were maintaining their long vigil,
 Lakshmana spoke to Guha
 of the sorrows unleashed in Ayodhya
 by Kaikeyi's wickedness; 512

the eerie silence that might be reigning
 in Dasaratha's mansion;
 the fear of a chain of catastrophes
 and the hope of saviour Grace. 513

Saumitri's doleful tale of possible
 misfortunes disturbed Guha
 and forced torrents from his eyes, for he loved
 Rama's noble family. 514

The anguished vigil ended with the dawn,
 and as desired by Rama,
 Guha made arrangements for the crossing
 of the Ganga by a boat. 515

“We’re bound in kinship bonds,” Rama declared;
 “we were four brothers before,
 you’re now the fifth, as dear as Bharata,
 Lakshmana or Satrugna.” 516

While now their bows, shafts and other baggage
 were being loaded, Rama
 asked Sumantra to return, and report
 everything to his Master. 517

Sumantra was disconsolate and wished
 to go with the travellers,
 but Rama persuasively advised him
 to get back soon to the King. 518

Rama sent special messages besides
 to Kausalya and the King,
 and to Bharata too requesting him
 to treat all three mothers well. 519

Then Rama secured the banyan’s milk-sap
 and matted his locks, and so
 did Lakshmana, and they took the proper
 vows and now looked like Rishis. 520

Sita first, then Lakshmana and Rama,
 boarded the boat, and the chief
 helmsman paddled as the travellers waved
 to Guha and Sumantra. 521

While the brothers made their salutations
 to Mother Ganga, Sita
 joined her hands in prayer as the splendid
 boat was approaching midstream: 522

“Mother Ganga, Goddess Bhāgīrathi,
 may we fulfil our vows, and
 return safely after fourteen years, and
 worship you in proper form. 523

Mother Ganga, Goddess of the three Worlds,
 help this tiger among men,
 Rama, to regain his Kingdom; and I’ll
 gratefully propitiate you. 524

Mother Ganga, Consort of the Ocean,
 may the mighty Raghava
 return blameless with us to Ayodhya,
 and I'll worship you always." 525

By now the boat had reached the southern bank,
 and getting down, they trekked on,
 Saumitri first, Sita next, Rama last,
 savouring of forest life. 526

It was uneven country, and Sita
 had a taste of the hardships
 of forest life, but she was undaunted
 and was game for everything. 527

Soon they passed through the prosperous Vatsa
 country with its abundant
 vegetation, and rested for the night
 under a great woodland tree. 528

Seized by sudden depression, Rama mourned
 his bitter fate, imagined
 the worst of Kaikeyi and the King, and
 asked Lakshmana to return. 529

Saumitri's soothing and sustaining touch
 cooled the fire of Rama's grief,
 and tender brotherly solicitude
 brought back his natural poise. 530

After some hours of sleep, they were awake
 at dawn to resume their walk
 and make for Prayag where the Ganga meets
 the opulent Yamuna. 531

They saw smoke a little ahead, and knew
 they were near Bhāradvāja's
 Ashrama, and reaching it soon enough,
 *made obeisance to the Sage. 532

The Rishi didn't need the antecedents
 of his guests to be retailed,
 and extended a spontaneous welcome
 to the royal visitors. 533

The Ashrama was a home for them all,
 he said, for the exile-years;
 but Rama wished to be beyond the reach
 of Ayodhya's citizens 534

Then the Rishi mentioned Chitrakūta,
 quite a jewel of a place,
 a holy hill a short walk to the West
 and across the Yamuna. 535

Having been hospitably entertained,
 they had a night's needed rest,
 and at dawn took leave of Bharadvaja
 and left for Chitrakuta. 536

Blessing them as they left, the Rishi said:
 "Rich in friendly birds and beasts,
 fruits and honey, you'll find Chitrakuta
 native to good thoughts and deeds." 537

Rama, Sita and Saumitri, taking
 their baggage, first walked westward
 along the Yamuna till they arrived
 at the well-worn crossing place. 538

There Lakshmana made a raft with bamboos,
 tree-branches and rattan stalks;
 carrying Sita, Rama boarded it,
 and his brother followed too. 539

Sita prayed again, now to Yamuna:
 "Help us to cross your waters
 and fulfil our vows; I'll propitiate you
 heartily when I return." 540

It was a safe crossing, and they stepped on
 the well wooded southern shore,
 and approaching the gorgeous banyan tree
 they sought its beneficence. 541

And coming close, Vaidehi prayed joining
 her palms: "O great Tree, help us
 fulfil our vows, and see dear Kausalya
 and Sumitra once again." 542

In a line they walked, Saumitri leading,
 then Sita, and Rama last;
 and when fruit or flower caught her fancy,
 Lakshmana gratified her. 543

The green-leaved trees, the cool streams, the loud cries
 of the swans, crows and peacocks,
 the wandering monkeys and elephants,
 all delighted Maithili. 544

Canto 20: **Bharata**

The travellers, after a good night's sleep
on the river-bank, resumed
their journey at dawn, and passed trees weighted
with fruits or rich honeycombs. 545

Reaching the Chitrakuta Hill at last
with its native opulence,
Rama asked Saumitri to gather logs
and erect their lodging there. 546

It was a strong cottage Lakshmana built,
mud-walled, leaf-covered, rain-proof,
well-ventilated, the materials
all garnered from the hillside. 547

Vaidehi was delighted, and Rama
complimented his brother,
and they all bathed and worshipped, as prescribed,
their tutelary deities. 548

No mansion but only a modest hut,
it had a concord of parts
that served the main purposes of a Home,
and merged with the surroundings. 549

Backgrounded by the hill and the river
Mandākini, befriended
by a fraternity of birds and beasts,
the exiles found peace and joy. 550

In the weeks that followed, the royal three
from Ayodhya discovered
in their mountain retreat all the facets
of a heaven upon earth. 551

They needed nothing, flora and fauna
hummed with a luxurious
magnificence, the whole region was rich
with mango, apple, jack-fruit; 552

herds of animals, regiments of birds,
moved about or flew in bright
formations, but caused no embarrassment,
nor warred with one another; 553

the mountain-crests flashed forth phosphorescent
 lights from the imprisoned ores,
 and flowers a million from hidden caves
 wafted their blended perfumes. 554

Maithili roamed the hillside with Rama,
 and Lakshmana followed them;
 and they oft visited the ascetics
 whose Ashramas lay scattered. 555

Some weeks after they had settled down there,
 Rama wandered with Sita
 braced by the morning air, and having reached
 a mountain-height, spoke these words: 556

“It’s lucky we’ve left the city and come
 to these gorgeous surroundings
 so conducive to the contemplation
 that opens to the Real. 557

We have seen these last few days and weeks how
 through Nature’s adoration
 the Divine Omnipresence can be felt,
 and this means beatitude. 558

Panoramic Nature, ever changing
 and yet quintessentially
 the same always, becomes for us exiles
 a wonderful gift of Grace. 559

This Hill of Revelation with its frame,
 form, contours, colours, eyes, sounds,
 high-peaks, majestic columns, flowing robes:
 don’t we glimpse the God we seek? 560

Indeed, Sita, don’t we find in this life
 a native felicity
 that, for all its luxury and splendour,
 we quite missed in Ayodhya? 561

And yet a Prince has the obligations
 appropriate to his class:
 the warrior code, the imperatives
 of the Kshatriya’s Dharma. 562

Perhaps, O Maithili, when our fourteen
 years are spent, we will go back
 armed with the gains of this rare adventure,
 and make successful rulers.” 563

Sita nodded and smiled though not ready
 to rationalise like him;
 but equally and transcendently
 happy, she found the apt words: 564

“I told you, Rama, I would be at home
 in the wet, wildness, wonder
 and abundance of the woods, and so far
 I have enjoyed everything. 565

Every hour of the day has its own sights,
 and every hour of the night
 its variegated luminiscences
 and muted revelations. 566

O Kakutstha, I’ve been happy because
 I’ve been with you, and you’ve been
 happy; and Saumitri has been happy
 lost in the joy of service. 567

Who can say, Rama, which occasions which —
 does the peace within invade
 the outer air, or does the joy without
 find resonance in the heart?” 568

Now they made the descent to the plain where
 Mandakini flowed with ease,
 and Rama, waxing poetic, enlarged
 upon the river’s beauties: 569

the opulence of swans and cranes, the wealth
 of trees burdened with flowers
 and choicest fruits, the busy bathing ghats
 and the crowding ascetics. 570

For Rama, the mountain was Ayodhya,
 the river was Sarayu,
 the dwellers essaying co-existence
 were the happy citizens! 571

Bathing thrice a day and subsisting on
 fruits, roots and honey, Rama
 could — he told Vaidehi — almost forget
 the Kingdom of Kosala. 572

They were now partaking of their modest
 meal when Rama heard a din
 in the far distance, and saw clouds of dust
 on the northern horizon. 573

Calling Lakshmana instantly, Rama
told him briefly what he saw
and asked him to investigate the cause
of the seeming commotion. 574

Climbing a tall pine tree, Saumitri saw
an army moving southward,
and on closer scrutiny concluded
it was Bharata himself. 575

Reporting to Rama, Lakshmana said,
his eyes blazing with anger,
that Bharata's men were marching indeed
with an evil intention: 576

"I can't mistake his banner; Bharata
is coming to kill us all;
let Vaidehi withdraw into the hut —
we'll be ready duly armed." 577

Rama who had a clearer grasp of things
promptly extinguished the fire
in Lakshmana's mind and heart, and gently
opened his eyes to the truth: 578

"Why do you canter to the conclusion
he is coming to kill us?
And is being ready to kill him first
the best or only answer? 579

I know, Bharata, he's not ambitious,
and he loves us both dearly:
cast aside this causeless anger against
the innocent Bharata. 580

And let me tell you this: while in all things
God has mixed good and evil,
Bharata is the sole exception, for
he's goodness, and nothing else. 581

Summoned to Ayodhya, he must have seen
Kaikēyī's grim handiwork,
and rejecting the crown, he has perhaps
come to offer it to me." 582

Rather abashed, Lakshmana timidly
suggested that it could be
Dasaratha himself come in full force
to meet the hapless exiles. 583

Rama answered: "It could be that, of course,
 but we don't see the great King's
 white umbrella! Patience, and let's await
 the unfoldment of events." 584

Lakshmana got down from the tree and joined
 Rama and Sita, and from
 their hut they had a view of the hillside
 and Mandākini below. 585

They could see the four-fold constituents
 of Dasaratha's army
 trying to find suitable camping sites,
 and causing much confusion. 586

The tense minutes passed as the royal three,
 now self-determined exiles,
 sat in sheer silence and selfconsciousness,
 and watched the movements below, 587

There was a rustle, the tread of walking,
 the rumble of blurred voices,
 the approaching rhythm of the footfalls,
 the near feel of the people. 588

All the while a fire burned at the altar
 centred in Rama's cottage,
 and the lambent tongues of flame gave added
 lustre to the gazing eyes. 589

Bharata was scaling the steps slowly,
 and it was almost as though
 a river was forcing itself backward
 reversing a settled flow. 590

And suddenly there he was before them,
 and sparked by recognition
 he sprang towards his dear elder brother
 in delight and misery. 591

"Arya!" he cried in his profound distress,
 "you suffer these privations
 because of me and my foolish mother —
 I've become Time's theme of scorn!" 592

This wasn't the Bharata he knew before
 but one pale and grief-stricken,
 with matted locks like an ascetic, and
 attired in bark and deer-skin. 593

As Rama held his beloved brother
 in a strong embrace, he saw —
 in a blurred background — Guha the chieftain,
 Sumantra, and Satrugna. 594

It was a touching reunion, but when
 Rama asked about the King,
 Bharata stunned the exiles with the fell
 news of Dasaratha's death: 595

"When I was away at Rajagriha
 and you had left Ayodhya,
 our noble father, bewailing your loss,
 died a broken-hearted man." 596

Rama swooned hearing the news, and Sita
 and Lakshmana reeled under
 the tragedy, and the bereaved offered
 mutual consolations. 597

Then the brothers, followed by Maithili,
 went down to Mandākini,
 and Raghava and Saumitri offered
 libations to their great Sire: 598

"May this water abide with you, Father,
 in the great world of the manes;
 may these crushed seeds abide with you, Father,
 in the great world of the manes!" 599

By the time Rama, Lakshmana, Sita —
 having done the obsequies —
 returned to their hut, Vasishta was there
 along with the Queen Mothers. 600

The calculated bareness of the place,
 the signs of austerity
 on Rama's, Sita's, Lakshmana's faces,
 all moved Kausalya to tears. 601

And her own pale face furrowed with anguish
 and her faded majesty
 made her seem a ghost of her former self,
 and they felt somehow guilty. 602

Sita too, melting with pity and love,
 touched the feet of Kāūsalya
 and Sumitra, who took her in their arms
 and spoke kind consoling words. 603

Kaikeyi, who came with the others, was
aloof and inscrutable,
perhaps gnawed by an inner sense of guilt
or too proud to feel remorse. 604

There were now gathered before Rama's hut
some of Ayodhya's elect,
the preceptors, the senior ministers,
and tribunes of the people; 605

and numerous uncommon commoners,
men and women whose faces
were wet with tears amply filled the background;
and Rama welcomed them all. 606

Breaking the silence of fear and surmise,
he queried Bharata why
he had left the Kingdom he was to rule
and donned an ascetic's garb. 607

Bharata replied: "I was no party
to my mother's demanding
the crown on my behalf, or our father's
consenting under duress. 608

My mother's asking for your exile was
a worse crime still, and she will
certainly fall into the worst of hells;
and now the King is no more. 609

Ayodhya wants to annul the double
injustice, and we've come here
to beseech you with one voice to return
and rule over us as King." 610

After a pause, Rama said: "Bharata,
best of brothers, knowing well,
as we do, Father was bound by his word,
how may we go against it? 611

It's no question of what we like or don't,
Truth is not negotiable;
when all things pass and change, Dharma alone
points the way to sanity. 612

Our notions of fairness and wickedness
are subjective formations,
but as Dharma transcends all mutations,
let's redeem our Father's word." 613

Thus did an irresistible Force meet
 an immovable object :
the two contenders were evenly matched,
 and hushed were the beholders. 614

When Rishi Jabali made a plea for
 hedonism as the true
virtue, Rama dismissed the sophistry
 and snubbed the man's presumption. 615

Canto 21: Rama on Raja Dharma

Now the sage, Vasishtha, traced the hoary
Line of the Ikshvaku Kings
and proved that, always, the eldest alone
had inherited the crown. 616

But vain were the appeals to precedents,
vain the reckless if well-meant
sophistries of Rishi Jabali, and
vain too were Bharata's pleas. 617

Nay, even his final threat of fasting
unto death had no effect,
and Rama, distressed but quite unruffled,
spoke to Bharata again: 618

"Whether we like it or not, Bharata,
what we do today will set
the right pattern of public behaviour
for all the ages to come. 619

It's the role of the House of the Raghus
by Divine dispensation
to act rightly, casting aside notions
of preference and profit. 620

You and I, Bharata, lack the wisdom
that comes from experience;
we haven't the scars of the wounds of life or
the taste of the tears in things. 621

Situations in life can develop
unexpectedly, and we
needs must react at once, guided only
by Dharma's imperatives. 622

Hadn't we in King Dasaratha the best
and noblest of fathers, and
in Kaikeyi the fondest of mothers?
Yet mark the present tangle! 623

There's no rational way of explaining
this reversal in affairs,
for things are happening in defiance
of human expectations. 624

I was to have been installed Vicegerent
with the Assembly's assent,
but since there's this earlier covenant,
it's not for us to wrangle. 625

The Royal word was given long ago,
a gesture of gratitude;
when the time comes for it to be redeemed,
there can be no resiling. 626

Now if we raised collateral issues,
my right as the eldest son,
your reluctance born of your love for me,
the perils of forest life, 627

the remorse and death of the aged King,
or the great surge of feeling
among the people, we shall miss the clue
to right thinking and action. 628

Dharma's commandments hold good for all time,
and rise above personal
predilections, local circumstances
or sectional interests. 629

Mother Kaikeyi desired that the boons
be made good, and you and I
can together uphold the moral law
and redeem our Father's word. 630

In all ages and climes people can see
the strident finality
of what we are doing, for this transcends
the stirrings of heart or mind. 631

But once, Bharata, you start questioning
the bases, the very Ground,
of Dharma, there'll be cracks all round, and this
our solid Earth will crumble. 632

We're here in this world for a little while,
and we have to play a part
worthy of our Kakutstha heritage
and commitment to Dharma. 633

I knew what it could mean, this journeying
through the woods; but I don't know
what is yet to happen to us during
the still unspent stretch of years. 634

Added to the initial requirement,
 here is Maithili braving
 the uncertainties of Dandaka life,
 and here's Lakshmana as well. 635

When Sita cited the right and duty
 of the consecrated wife,
sahadharmini, to share her Lord's life,
 once more I was Dharma-bound. 636

And Lakshmana pleaded his native right
 of brotherly devotion,
 and he has come too, my *alter ego*,
 our vigilant serviteur. 637

But don't you see, Bharata, in nothing
 do we have complete control:
 our strategies are all thrown out of gear,
 and only chagrin is left. 638

Whether these changes and complications
 are but random intrusions,
 or whether they're part of the larger good,
 'tis beyond our human ken. 639

There may be times when the hapless agent
 is caught between opposing
 pulls of conscience, a Dharmic dilemma,
 two balancing compulsions. 640

In such a predicament, either way
 may mean suffering, both ways
 may be valid, yet one must make a choice
 and bear the consequences. 641

But, Bharata, no such ambivalence
 afflicts us now, for the choice
 is between my private good and comfort
 and a public moral stance. 642

I've thought it over long and anxiously,
 and this alone seems proper;
 poised between rival pulls, let's sacrifice
 the private for the public. 643

You may say there's the will of the people,
 Ayodhya has come with you,
 and wants me back! But questions of Dharma
 aren't decided by numbers. 644

Bharata, the commandments of Dharma,
 like Nature's Laws, admit of
 no meddling, and the people's voice or will
 is a very fickle thing. 645

Rumour-mongers and bold rabble-rousers
 could exploit prejudices,
 make the baser impulses the nobler
 and engineer confusion. 646

Once we stray, Bharata, from the Kingsway
 of Dharma's eternal laws,
 we'll be soon entrapped in a worse jungle
 than the darkest Dandaka. 647

When Dharma's imperatives determine
 legitimacy, and say,
 'This is right, and thus must you act!', it's wrong
 to look round for escape routes. 648

Private hurt, a wife's pleading, a mother's
 tear-stained face, kinsmen's dolour,
 the people's clamour or demonstration —
 nothing can alter the Law. 649

Once during my brief but memorable
 travels with Visvamitra,
 he let me see in a synoptic spell
 the future as it might be. 650

Beyonding distances in time, I saw
 humankind growing native
 to craven fear, mere animality
 and gross manipulation. 651

People lured by power, its blandishments,
 cease to be the tenements
 of the soul, and become commodities
 for ready sale or barter. 652

Were the reign of Dharma to suffer such
 obscuration, perversion,
 negation; if men in authority
 turned out to be unrighteous; 653

should even the Princes of the land fail
 to sustain the moral Law:
 what could you hope for but the certain crash
 of the social edifice? 654

All power, Bharata, is like poison:
 when it came as the first gift
 of the churning of the ocean, Shiva
 quaffed and stayed it in his throat. 655

Thus we need the sovereign Grace of the Lord,
 both to exercise power
 and be immune from its deadly poison . . .
 always, then, Power *and* Grace! 656

In our total submission to Dharma,
 there's the sure promise of Grace;
 but those that rely on Power alone
 must perish by its poison. 657

Gifted for a while with the great Rishi's
 clairvoyant vision, I saw
 how, denying the adamant Laws,
 men cantered towards their doom. 658

Like a race possessed by evil spirits,
 the ambitious human might
 engage in the mad pursuit of Power
 totally divorced from Grace. 659

Father against son, brother and brother
 torn apart, son befouling
 the family hearth — each unto himself,
 the Devil for one and all! 660

I shuddered at the grim sight of the freaks
 that schemed against their fathers,
 accomplishing the last atrocity,
 regicide and parricide. 661

I saw brother's hand raised against brother
 decreeing a bleak desert
 where all consanguinity was wiped out,
 and the sole survivor ruled! 662

And, as in the eeriest of nightmares,
 I saw ingenuities
 of torture, hell-made engines of terror,
 and stark inhumanities. 663

To eliminate current rivalry
 and ensure future safety
 a thousand villainies could be unleashed
 and infernos enacted. 664

In their mad lust for instant victory
 I saw crazed men foul the air,
 playact the Asura in God's disguise
 and bring order crashing down. 665

And women too, gentle, fashioned fair and
 born for love and motherhood,
 gifted with compassion and sufferance,
 might go the way of the males. 666

Once the narrow yet safe razor-edged path
 has been thoughtlessly exchanged
 for the wildernesses on either side,
 perils a thousand assail, 667

the native disciplined habits permit
 impairment and distortion,
 and be the battle lost or won, the soul
 finds its glassy essence gone. 668

No more kinship, friendship or fellowship,
 no more blood-ties, or duty,
 no more restraint, or human decency—
 the moment's hunger is all. 669

When we follow the dictates of Dharma,
 we're buttressed by the sanction
 of all the millennial past ages
 and their collective wisdom. 670

But where the action concerns our own weal
 (or what we so apprehend),
 the mind intervenes with its reasoning
 and the heart sways as it likes. 671

For every ordained right course of action,
 the ego, given a chance,
 can offer a hundred or more options
 each with its show of reason. 672

Or advisers, well-wishers, advocates,
 a rally of sycophants,
 a bunch of astrologers, soothsayers,
 may all converge upon you. 673

It's not difficult to say pleasing things,
 or cite sundry precedents
 from far past times, or press the argument
 that the worse is the better. 674

You may be exhorted to disobey
the ageless great commandments
on the naive plea that the general good
demands such dereliction. 675

I shuddered when Visvamitra opened
my stunned unbelieving eyes
to such grim scenarios of horror
as yet hid in the future. 676

Eliminate your rivals, terrorise
the dazed citizenry, and
mobilise the ready mercenaries
to manufacture applause! 677

The human mind, unless held in fetters
to a firm Code of Ethics,
will smartly improvise variations
of villainy or folly. 678

The unbribed ego can go beserk
in a permissive climate,
assume the God but enact the Devil
in his dogged falsity. 679

Let's keep, Bharata, to the royal road,
the tested path of Dharma,
and be it long or short, smooth or sharp-edged,
we'll surely arrive at last. 680

But should we fail in vigilance supreme
and let sloth or slumber take
o'er the body's natural functioning,
the Commonwealth must collapse. 681

Conscience grown cowardly, calculation
lost in the weights and measures
of the mart, the soul forever mortgaged
to the Lord of all Falsehoods: 682

with the blind, the mindless and the corrupt
whirling round the prickly pear,
performing the foulest flamboyances
and the worst desecrations: 683

and panting still, and mad and maddening,
profaning all sacredness,
goodness, humanness, the Sons of Darkness
might one day o'errun the Earth. 684

170 *Sitayana*

You do not know, **Bharata**, the limits
to which man's iniquity
can go when it supinely surrenders
to the obsessionist pulls. 685

There's the age-long admonition against
the triad of appetites,
the vital, material, sensual:
it thunders in our ears still. 686

And it's the nature of these appetites
that they feed upon themselves,
or on one another, thus worsening
the sickness of society. 687

Just imagine, **Bharata**, an entire
population opting for
the sordid habiliments of Power,
yet wholly bereft of Grace! 688

When the Princes fail in their adhesion
to the eternal Edicts,
then the multitude will seize all power
and run amuck with its taste. 689

All things are valid: conscience, a coward;
loyalty and gratitude,
superstitions; morals, irrelevant;
the common good, but who cares? 690

O **Bharata**, when this terrible curse,
Power unleavened by Grace,
seizes a people, all aberrations
will gain legitimacy. 691

A Kingdom or a City or Commune
sold over to the random
impulses, the wild and wayward fancies,
of the mob and its leaders, 692

but quite divorced from the rule of Dharma,
the overlordship of God,
must needs develop scissions of all sorts,
and invite dissolution. 693

Should you opt out of the City of God
or sovereignty of Dharma,
what looms ahead is no fancied Dreamland,
only Society's demise! 694

Let's then be humble enough, Bharata,
to accept the verities,
bow to our filial obligations
and wait on coming events." 695

Rama ceased, and although he seemed to feel
exhausted by the effort,
the words carried their own finality
and commanded acceptance. 696

Now the venerable Sage Vasishta
communed within for a while
and relieved the residual tension
with a gracious compromise. 697

Thus was Rama persuaded to give
his gold-emblazoned sandals
as the twy-symbol of his sovereignty;
and Bharata received them, 698

with due deference, love and submission,
and promised to rule over
Kosala for fourteen years, but only
as Agent of the true King. 699

They would be the two hands that together
perform good deeds, the two gates
of protection, the twin eyes of wisdom
sustaining a religion. 700

Even so was the warmly debated
issue happily resolved,
and this was greeted with immense relief
by everybody present. 701

Canto 22: Sita and Srutakirti

While Rama, Bharata and Vasishtha
sat apart to finalise
the details of the concordat, the rest
moved about to meet and talk. 702

Lakshmana had much to tell Kausalya,
Sumitra and Satrughna;
and Guha and Sumantra waxed about
Bharata's integrity. 703

Seizing her chance, Srutakirti (who had
come with the three Queen Mothers)
took Sita aside, and recalled what had
happened in the interim: 704

"You wouldn't believe it, Sita, but it's true—
when you three left the City,
there was a universal cessation
of normal activity. 705

The fire-rites were suspended; elephants
declined all food; cows repulsed
their calves; shops pulled down their shutters; sullen
silence reigned o'er Ayodhya. 706

Signifying a monstrous reversal
of the natural order,
the very elements—wind, fire, rain, sky—
seemed to fail in their function. 707

The gardens seemed to smile no more, the birds
had no feeling for flying
or chirping, flowers seemed to wilt, and trees
to wither and shed their leaves. 708

The inner family relationships
and loyalties were under
a terrible strain, and all thought only
of the fleeing chariot. 709

There was gloom in Ayodhya's streets and homes,
and people were panicky
that Kaikeyi's rule would be unrighteous
and life would be a torture. 710

Having rejected Kaikeyi, the King
retired to Kausalya's rooms
and there ate his heart out thinking, talking,
of Rama and the exiles. 711

And when stricken Kausalya broke down too,
Sumitra spoke soothing words
arising from the Spirit's depths and charged
with great persuasive power. 712

'Rama carries with him,' Sumitra said,
'the invincible's birth-mark;
Lakshmana is his armour, and Sita
their grace of glory Divine.' 713

When Sumantra returned, having seen you
cross the Ganga and make for
the forest, he spoke ecstatically
about you to Kausalya. 714

'Sita, indeed, is in her element,'
Sumantra remarked; 'she shows
no fear, no strain on her faith in Rama;
she's the Goddess of the woods! 715

She couldn't be more happy in Ayodhya's
mansions, arbours and gardens
than she is in the grim wildernesses
or the penitential woods. 716

The day's exertions don't seem to tire her,
her countenance is aflame
lit by the inner light, and she's immune
to fatigue, strong winds, or thorns. 717

She wears ornaments as before, and when
she walks, her bare feet dazzle
like red lotus as if she is dancing
to her anklet-bells' music. 718

But, of course, the clue to her happiness
lies in her love of Rama;
it's the great mystique of identity,
for Sita-Rama are one. 719

With Rama's puissant and protective arm
around her, she has no fear
when encountering forest-elephant,
leopard, lion or tiger.' 720

You cannot imagine how delighted
 and proud we three sisters were,
 but although Sumitra seemed satisfied,
 Kausalya was distraught still. 721

When Sumantra conveyed to her the good
 news of her son's well-being;
 and to the King, Rama's respectful love,
 and Lakshmana's resentment: 722

Kausalya in a weak moment assailed
 the King with accusations,
 and he writhed anew with self-abasement
 and self-wrought lacerations. 723

Now he remembered a sin of past times,
 the accidental killing
 of a blind anchorite's son, and the curse
 that the foul deed had provoked. 724

Exhausted by the confessional tale,
 the King drifted to slumber
 and life left him in the course of the night,
 and sorrow o'erwhelmed us all. 725

Kausalya, reeling under the fresh blow,
 cried: 'The King's gone, and I live;
 indeed, my heart must be far stonier
 than a hundred thunderbolts!' 726

Vasishta and the Elders in Council
 sent for Bharata at once,
 but on his coming, he declined the crown,
 and raved against his mother: 727

'This was how you'd raise me high! Would you nurse
 a tree by severing it
 from its roots? Didn't you know Sita-Rama
 are the base of my being? 728

and the life of my living, like water
 for the fish? Thoughtless woman!
 Why didn't your hard heart break into fragments
 when you made your fell demands? 729

Did you really think that I would accept
 this ill-gotten prize? I don't
 want people to say, He's Kaikeyi's son,
 and therefore, greedy, grasping! 730

Since ever I learnt to feel, think and pray,
 it has been my sole desire
 that people should say, He's Rama's brother,
 after all, centered in him!'

731

Then, after the obsequies to the King,
 Bharata resolved that all
 Ayodhya with one voice should beg Rama
 to accept the royal crown.

732

Sita, Sita, those were exciting weeks,
 sorrow doubled with wonder,
 tragedy somehow transforming itself
 into the purest sublime!"

733

A pause in the breathless recital gave
 Sita the chance to inquire
 about Urmila and Mandavi—and
 of Manthara the crookback.

734

"I was going to tell you everything,"
 gushed Srutakirti; "you know
 Urmila, she divides her time between
 deep sleep and colour painting.

735

I think her third eye sees all that you do,
 for—would you believe it?—she
 has painted *this* Hill, and all *this* landscape,
 and even this hermitage!

736

Mandavi was anxious and high-strung till
 Bharata came, but he soared
 to the highest heavens by rejecting
 both Kaikeyi and the crown.

737

Then Janaka and Sunayana came
 . hearing of Dasaratha's
 demise, and there was this mighty debate
 regarding the succession.

738

Sunayana had a prolonged meeting
 with Kausalya, Sumitra;
 and she learnt all, while the bereaved Queens had
 the much needed healing touch.

739

Janaka applauded Rama's action
 honouring his father's word,
 and praised still more Bharata's heroic
 act of renunciation.

740

And then Sita, Uncle was proud of you,
 and sent through me his blessing:
 'Sita, my child, unique indeed your feat
 of faith, courage, loyalty. 741

Your fame will be sung for all time to come,
 and its cleansing, redeeming
 and sanctifying power will exceed
 the gloried Mother Ganga's: 742

the divine Bhāgīrathi purifies
 the places she passes by —
 Haridwar, Prayag, Kashi — but your name
 will redeem all human hearts!" 743

Sita had a tremor of happiness
 and humility, and tears
 mingled with her smiles, and quite embarrassed,
 she asked about the hunchback. 744

"As for that beauty," Srutakirti said,
 "she sported her finery
 and strutted about like a tipsy ape
 insulting other women. 745

But my dear Satrugna, true to his name,
 taught the creature the lesson
 she needed, and left her in a shambles
 with her jewellery scattered. 746

Oh, she yelled, and clawed the air, and bellowed
 distractedly, and it was
 Bharata coming just then that rescued
 her, and let her go in peace. 747

Now Sita, we seldom see the humpback,
 and Kaikeyi herself keeps
 aloof — you've seen her today, it's as though
 something has jangled her life. • 748

And I mustn't forget to tell you, Sita,
 your dear parrot is thriving;
 Mandavi has taken care of it too,
 and has an eye for all things. 749

This was why she had to be left behind:
 she looks after Urmila,
 all the Queen's apartments, and a thousand
 things besides — she's marvellous!" 750

With great relish, she almost lived again
 the journey from Ayodhya
 to Chitrakuta: "An entire city
 moving, marching, arriving! 751

What an extraordinary Caravan:
 the splendid Army, of course,
 and all the gentry, priesthood and merchants—
 jewellers, potters, brewers. 752

And at Sringerapuram, Guha
 first suspected, then welcomed
 Bharata, and told us all about you—
 what you did, and where you slept. 753

Having ferried us across the Ganga,
 he joined us, and when we reached
 Sage Bharadvaja's Ashrama, he too
 first suspected Bharata! 754

But soon he knew the utter purity
 and peerless nobility
 of Bharata's motives, and advised him
 to make for Chitrakuta. 755

And so we're here, Sita, and I'm happy
 at the outcome of the trip,
 and fourteen years will fly like winged thoughts,
 and you will be back with us!" 756

Meanwhile Bharata's vast retinue had
 got ready for the return,
 and obeisances, leave-takings, blessings,
 goodbyes charged the mountain air. 757

Both Kausalya and Sumitra embraced
 the children they were to leave
 behind, and these three offered obeisance
 to their mothers and elders. 758

Bharata's face shone with serenity
 as he said: "O Kakutstha,
 only for the rest of the fourteen years,
 and not a minute longer. 759

If you do not return and relieve me
 of the weight of royalty
 at the appropriate time, I'll indeed
 opt for self-immolation. 760

I'll submit problems of State and render
 my accounts to the Sandals;
 I'll administer the realm in your name,
 and rely on your backing. 761

While acting as Agent of these Sandals,
 I'll live in Nandigrama
 outside Ayodhya, and I'll be attired
 and live like an achorite." 762

Rama warmly embraced Bharata and
 Satrughna; paid obeisance
 to Vasishta; and Sita, Lakshmana
 touched the feet of their elders. 763

And when Bharata, placing the Sandals
 on his head reverently,
 led the returning host, Rama, Sita
 and Lakshmana stood watching. 764

They saw the descending line disappear
 below the Hill, then went back
 to the cottage, and gave vent to their tears;
 Nature would assert itself! 765

BOOK THREE

ARANYA

Canto 23: Atri and Anasuya

- Fourteen had seemed a frightful span of Time
and each year such a desert
of the pitiless stretch of days, weeks, months;
fourteen years in the heyday 1
- of Life's spring with its credit of freshness,
the soft shoots and sticky leaves,
the warm Sun hastening the blossoming
and the promise of fruition. 2
- The mere thought of forest life had evoked
vague perspectives of terror,
the whole alphabet of wildness and wet,
and the uncharted Unknown. 3
- But Old Time had no taste for tarrying,
and whirled the world with himself;
and entrances and exits would account
for the fleeting hours and years. 4
- For some weeks since Bharata's departure
with his retinue, Rama
remained with Maithili and Lakshmana
in his Chitrakuta hut. 5
- But they found that life was not quite the same
as before, for memories
of noble Bharata's visit lingered
and bred unending remorse. 6
- Ah here Kausalya sat like sufferance,
and here Sumitra, wisdom
incarnate; and here the hoary High Priests,
Vasishta, Vamadeva. 7
- The distinctive Bharata ambience
and the Satrughna presence
seemed to fill the familiar mountain air
with an overpowering force. 8
- And Sita still heard the echoing buzz
of Srutakirti's chatter
recalling happenings in Ayodhya
since the long exile began. 9

Besides, Rama became increasingly
 aware of uneasiness,
 even panic, among the ascetics
 living on Chitrakuta. 10

They moved about furtively and in groups
 as though pursued by phantoms;
 and making obeisance to their Leader,
 Rama respectfully asked: 11

“What’s the reason for your uneasiness?
 Have I, or my brother, or
 my wife, offended you unknowingly?
 Why all this fear and panic?” 12

That sage and venerable elder said:
 “It’s unthinkable, Rama,
 that Sita, the icon of perfection,
 should slight us even in dream. 13

As for you and Saumitri, your brother,
 your presence has come to mean
 protection for us, and provocation
 to the Rakshasas around. 14

Khara the Janasthana cannibal
 has orders from Ravana,
 his brother, to expel the ascetics
 from the Dandaka forest. 15

We receive much harrassment from Khara
 and his myrmidons, our hearths
 are polluted, our rites desecrated,
 our oblations fouled and soured. 16

We’ve decided to move to a safer
 sanctuary not far off,
 and you may come with us too — for truly
 you’re their ultimate target. 17

Certainly, Rama, it would be prudent
 to leave this endangered place
 and look for a less exposed settlement
 where Sita can feel secure.” 18

Although Raghava didn’t quite understand
 their almost precipitate
 departure, the resulting loneliness
 on the Hill was oppressive. 19

- Rama also felt, after Bharata's
visit, that Chitrakuta
was far too easily accessible
to Ayodhya's citizens. 20
- And the camping by Bharata's army —
the chariots, elephants,
horses, infantry — had left its mark on
the Hill and its environs. 21
- Rama decided, for all these reasons,
to move southward, and when they
reached Sage Atri's Ashrama before long
all three were warmly received. 22
- Atri and his spouse Anasuya had
a legendary renown
for their purity and austerity
and mythical sanctity. 23
- Their hermitage stood quite isolated,
rather delicately poised
between civilised life and the darkness
of the forest hinterland. 24
- Even as a child, Sitā had been thrilled
by the stories of Atri's
askesis and Sati Anasuya's
feats of miraculism. 25
- As the visitors rendered obeisance,
the Rishi gave a Father's
welcome to his children, and introduced
his own wife to Maithili: 26
- "This is Anasuya the Unjealous
known for her austerities,
her feats of benevolence, and total
adhesion to righteousness." 27
- As advised by the Rishi and Rama
himself, Vaidehi approached
Anasuya with reverence and love
and paid obeisance to her. 28
- How frail and feeble the aged woman
ascetic, her skin wrinkled,
her tresses white and her body shaken
like a plantain in the wind! 29

For Sita, 'twas a moment of supreme
 fulfilment, for how often
 as a growing child she hadn't revered
 this holy Anasuya! 30

"O blessed one!" she said delightedly;
 "Exemplum of the true wife!
 how fortunate I am to have *darshan*
 of your ambrosial Presence! 31

I have heard of your miraculous feats:
 the power of your *tapas*
 has turned drought into plenty, the desert
 into a flowing river. 32

We've heard it said that, with your askesis,
 you have furthered the *tapas*
 of the sages; that you have helped the gods
 themselves out of their narrows. 33

Mother Anasuya! immaculate
 woman! the pure feminine
 as compassion, puissance and perfection:
 I seek and need your blessings." 34

"Sita, you are indeed blest beyond words,"
 said Anasuya slowly;
 "in fair and foul climate alike, you are
 with Rama your exiled spouse. 35

There's nothing nobler or more sanctified
 in life than conjugal love,
 the unwavering devotion of wife
 to her consecrated Lord." 36

"My mother — and Kausalya too — have stressed
 the same truth," Sita replied;
 "I'm blessed because Rama is husband, friend,
 father, mother, comrade, all! 37

As I faced the sacred Fire at the time
 of my marriage, my mother
 called to mind Savitri and Rohini
 as examples to follow. 38

What you have said, Mother Anasuya,
 chimes with the exhortations
 from my mothers, and I'll accordingly
 direct the course of my life." 39

Kissing her, Anasuya pressed Sita
to ask for a boon she liked;
Sita answered with a smile, "I have all;
I don't know what more I need." 40

Pleased with Sita's response, Anasuya
made a gift of choice raiment,
ornaments, cosmetics and rich ointment,
and an unfading garland. 41

"Take these, Sita, they've divine potency,"
said Anasuya; "if you
rub your body with this unguent, you will
please Rama more than ever." 42

Then, on her special request, Sita spoke
of her Earth-born mystery,
her life in Mithila, her strange bride-price
and her marriage to Rama. 43

Anasuya heard the account with joy
and wished to see Maithili
adorned with the rare presents she had won;
and Sita acquiesced at once. 44

"This has been a unique feast for my eyes,"
said Anasuya with tears
of transcendent bliss; "let us be human,
Sita, sensible and wise. 45

Take all that talk of the miraculous
with a pinch or two of salt:
think of me, Sita, as a womanly
woman, no magic-monger. 46

This world — this environing universe —
is a self-generating
symphony, and so every jarring note
is but an aberration. 47

One has to canter to the still centre,
and by an effort of will
touch the keys, set right the strings, till once more
the concert renews itself. 48

Or there may have to be a worsening
ere things get better and race
back to harmony: the wiser course, then,
would be to wait — wait on Grace. 49

Canto 24: **Inside Dandaka**

Drawn into the dense and dreaded woodland
with its famed hermitages,
the royal exiles saw clear vestiges
of saintly disciplined life. 58

Numerous were the scattered settlements,
but they framed into a whole
with the inmates of each elected place
cultivating quietude. 59

They were sanctuaries for the chosen,
and the Vedic way of life
as enacted by the inhabitants
made the atmosphere holy. 60

The dwellings were shaded, secluded, clean;
birds and shy deer felt at home;
the altars kept the sacred Fires burning;
the oblations never failed. 61

As the priests with practised ease recited
the immemorial Riks,
the ghee-fed flames rose high as if intent
on bringing the heavens down. 62

Luxurious overgrowths surrounded
the focal hermitages,
and the great exemplars of askesis
moved about, a class apart. 63

They were clad in austere tree-bark raiment,
their firm hands held *kusu* grass
and twigs of a length for fire-offering;
and inaudibly they prayed. 64

Lost in self-absorption that quite annulled
the dichotomies of life,
they had beyonded desire and defeat
and found their kingdom within. 65

There were hermitresses too, and children
who romped like sounds in music,
and the glint in their eyes and their prattle
presaged a golden future. 66

Rich with Nature's bounty of the seasons
 and the human verities,
 the retreats were a world within the wild
 and wicked Dandaka world. 67

Sita had heard of the Rakshasa breed,
 those denizens of the dark
 driven to thwart the Divine ordering
 of an Earthly Paradise. 68

Oft had Rama recalled the demoness
 Tataka, how her misdeeds
 spelt sacrilege to the Sacrifices
 of Rishi Visvamitra. 69

The titans were cosmic aberrations
 who sought their good in evil
 and found delight in the profanation
 of the sanctified altars. 70

That the sex feminine, the mother sex —
 albeit of the demon race —
 should ever traffick in cold cruelty
 or cry 'Chaos' and 'Kill, kill!' 71

But Sita's film of memory was scrawled
 with the sepulchral figures
 of Kaikeyi and crooked Manthara,
 and Tataka didn't surprise. 72

There was of course that rankling scratch of pain,
 the killing of Tataka:
 had Sita been with Rama at the time,
 that might have been averted. 73

Or perhaps the demoness asked for it,
 and there was no other way!
 And now, with bow unstrung, accompanied
 by Sita and Saumitri, 74

his eyes all animation and ardour,
 his stride bold and resolute,
 Rama walked into the Dandaka woods
 and made for the Mandala. 75

Receiving the resplendent visitors,
 the all-perceiving Rishis
 gave spontaneous welcome to the Princes
 and the flame-pure Vaidehi. 76

And marvelling at the majestic three,
 their beauty of build and mind
 and soul, the wise in the congregation
 made a humble submission: 77

“Rama of the Raghu race! we’ve abjured
 arms even for self-defence;
 we beseech you, O Prince, to gather us
 within your protection’s sway.” 78

The sages then duly honoured and blessed
 the uncommon guests, offered
 fruits and roots, and gave lodgings for the night
 in the Ashrama spaces. 79

When early dawn appeared, Rama, Sita,
 Lakshmana, fully refreshed
 by the night’s rest, took leave of the Rishis
 and walked into Dandaka. 80

Unlike the Mandata, its harmony
 of parts and sufficiency,
 the jungle seemed an unseemly excess,
 a distortion of Nature. 81

Tigers, bears, pursuing the frightened deer;
 the flora in disarray;
 the pools muddied, the birds bereft of song—
 only the crickets chirping. 82

Suddenly the travellers encountered
 a figure huge, revolting,
 clad in blood-dripping tiger-skin; death-like
 his mien, and thunder his speech. 83

Marking the humans, the monster gave out
 a deafening yell, swooped on
 Vaidehi in defiance of her Lord,
 and bellowed these boastful words: 84

“I’m Viradha the Rakshasa, I live
 on the flesh of the Rishis,
 I’ll make this woman my wife: as for you,
 I’ll kill you and quaff the blood.” 85

Sighting Maithili on Viradha’s hip
 trembling like a storm-caught leaf,
 Rama gave vent to tears, but Lakshmana
 exhorted him to action. 86

Branding him as evil, Rama sent forth
 a team of seven arrows
 against Viradha, who set down Sita
 and turned against the brothers. 87

It was a brief but bitter engagement,
 and when Viradha gathered
 both Rama and Lakshmana, and strode forth
 heaving them on his shoulders, 88

the Princes a while let him please himself;
 but Maithili grew alarmed
 and cried in distress: "Seize me if you must,
 O Rakshasa, but spare them." 89

Stung by her words, they chopped off Viradha's
 hands and felled him on the ground:
 now he recalled the curse that had damned him,
 a Gandharva, to that life, 90

and howling distraught, he begged for release;
 they ended his agony,
 dug a pit and buried him, and his soul
 left for the Gandharva world. 91

Rejoining Sita and quelling her fears,
 all three reached Sarabhanga's
 hermitage, and saw Indra and his train
 precipitately withdraw. 92

Having seen Rama, Sita, Lakshmana,
 the great Sage sensed fulfilment
 and entered the fire to rise to Heaven
 in his ethereal self. 93

The many ascetics of the forest
 who witnessed Sarabhanga's
 ascent had also viewed from a distance
 the killing of Viradha. 94

Diverse their ascetic deprivations,
 disciplines, dedications;
 some lived frugally, some in the open;
 some had their retreats in caves; 95

some opted for stringent austerities,
 some kept slumber at arm's length,
 some fancied wetness, and some the Five Fires:
 Yoga gave lustre to all. 96

- The assembled anchorites in one voice
supplicated to Rama:
“We forest-dwellers are persecuted
by the Rovers of the Night; 97
- our retreats on river-banks and hill-slopes
bear daily witness to deeds
of evil, for our sages are being
butchered by the Rakshasas. 98
- They foul and disrupt our Sacrifices
and desecrate our altars.
Upholder of Dharma! safeguard us from
these delegates of the Dark.” 99
- And Rama said, deeply moved: “It’s for you
to command my services;
my duty is clear, and sure I’ll rid you
of the Rakshasa menace.” 100
- Accompanied by some of the Rishis,
the travellers reached at last
the Ashrama of aged Sutikshna,
and made obeisance to him. 101
- “Welcome!” said the Sage embracing Rama;
“your presence lights up the place;
I’ve been tarrying only in the hope
your steps might cross my threshold.” 102
- He would not accept Sutikshna’s offer
of the fruits of his *tapas*
for ‘twas proper, Rama said, that he should
win them by his own effort. 103
- Declining also the Rishi’s request
that they might spend their exile
in the Ashrama, Rama said they would
go round all the settlements. 104
- They rested there, however, for the night,
and at break of dawn they bathed,
worshipped the Sun, circumambulated
the Sage, and took leave of him 105
- On the way they saw spread out before them
all Nature’s munificence
of life, colour, shape, sound, poise, stir, movement,
and all fauna and flora. 106

Seizing a suitable moment, Sita
 spoke freely to her fair Lord:
 "I'm but a woman, yet I'll remind you
 of Dharma's imperatives. 107

Three are the prime temptations that call for
 rejection unqualified:
 falsehood, first of all; worse, adultery;
 and third, violence without cause. 108

Stranger to falsehood, you are also free
 from the faintest stir of lust;
 but I see the last of the temptations
 has secured a hold on you. 109

You've lightly given word to the sages
 that you will rid Dandaka
 of the Rakshasas: in our present plight,
 is it wise, fair or prudent? 110

As desired by your Father, you are here
 an exile for fourteen years
 condemned to matted locks and hermit weeds;
 this is no season for arms. 111

In self-defence, yes, as with Viradha;
 but this launching a crusade
 even against those that haven't injured us,
 I call it causeless violence. 112

I feel dazed and careworn with anxiety
 when you two carry your bows
 and arrows, ready for instant action
 against the Rakshasa hordes. 113

I must needs call to your mind the hermit
 who had for safe custody
 a gleaming sharp sword, and went on gazing
 at it with obsessive love; 114

and he carried it wherever he went,
 doted on it all the time,
 and so he lost his inner poise and peace,
 and lapsed from enlightenment. 115

Your hereditary warrior-role
 and what you've now opted for—
 the hermit's contemplative way of life—
 these don't chime with each other. 116

Duties always pair with privileges:
you've renounced the Kshattriya's
powers; is it fair, then, to shoulder still
the fighter-code's compulsions? 117

When the long years of exile are over
and we're back in Ayodhya,
that'll be the time to clasp the Bow again
with its quiverful of shafts. 118

I grant I'm a woman, but Janaka's
daughter too, and Rama's wife:
how may I refrain from speech or counsel
when Dharma beats a retreat?" 119

"You speak indeed like Janaka's daughter,"
Rama answered; "no wonder
the woman in you feels such repugnance
to all forms of cruelty. 120

But we've seen in the Ashrama clusters
remnants of the sabotage
and sacrilege done by the Rakshasas,
the sworn enemies of Light. 121

There'll be no killing of all and sundry,
only of evil-doers
that cross our path, or cause determined hurt
to the ministers of God. 122

And, besides, as you no doubt recollect,
the Rishis in a body
took refuge in me and detailed their woes
and asked for my protection. 123

My word has been given: better batter
my heart and lose Lakshmana,
lose you, and all, than break my plighted word:
this is the Law that rules me. 124

It's out of your love and concern, Sita,
you've spoken, and you're dearer
than life itself to me: let's fare forward
and tread the path of Dharma." 125

So they walked in a file, Rama leading,
slender-waisted Sita next,
and last, Lakshmana carrying his bow—
and they teamed to perfection. 126

For a while, though, they were like prisoners
 of their private thoughts, a cloud
 no bigger than a child's hand hovering
 o'er the ambiguous air. 127

But the feel of Nature's magnificence
 dispelled all the mist and cloud;
 and the streams and pools, the cranes, swans, the herds
 of deer, and the singing birds, 128

all Nature took the travellers in hand
 until, late in the evening,
 they reached an enchanting lake invested
 with a teasing mystery. 129

They saw elephants near the banks; and swans,
 cranes and lotuses gambolled
 on the water; and sweet music and song
 seemed to come from the lake's depths. 130

'Twas a bower invisible, they learnt,
 where Mandakarni sported
 with the five nymphs sent by Indra to thwart
 the Rishi's austerities. 131

The wise one alas! whose long askesis
 had made the gods uneasy,
 now content with the drowsy Life Heavens
 of boredom unlimited! 132

Vastly amused by the ascetic's plight,
 the royal exiles shifted
 their vision, and now saw spread before them
 the great hermit settlements. 133

Moving closer, they could see Ashramas
 varied and spacious and fair,
 and the light of Truth and the ambience
 of ardour were everywhere. 134

They had a lively spontaneous welcome
 from the Rishis young and old,
 and the fraternity urged the exiles
 to live in the settlements. 135

This was to their liking too, and Sita,
 Rama and Lakshmana moved
 from Ashrama to Ashrama, a few
 marvellous days here, a week, 136

a fortnight, or a month, at another
hermitage, or a full year
or two in a choice Retreat, and so on,
for more than ten years in all.

How quickly and profitably Time passed,
and the rhythm of days, weeks,
months, seasons; the steady march of the years —
a circuit and symphony.

Each hermitage was a haven apart,
and the configuration
of the settlements, the critical mass,
glowed like a constellation.

The same complex of male and female; old
and young, birth, growth, decline; and
the same drama of living and dying, -
yet sporting numberless forms! 140

Of Life's infinite manifestations
the human species alone
carried a load of possibility,
and uncertainty as well

But the human base also permitted
a range of variations
comprising extremes of evil and good,
the demon and the divine. 142

While within the elected enclosures
 life was a musical piece
 and the unobtrusive inmates the notes
 distinctive and coalescing,

143

there could be sudden jangling intrusions
by the prowlers of the Night
who splashed forth darkness and desecration
and o'erpowered the Rishis.

These, however, grew fewer with the years,
the wreckers kept out of bounds
as though scenting the twin bowmen's presence;
and the Mandalas knew peace.

Canto 25 **Around the Ashramas**

During their leisurely travels around
the Retreats in Dandaka,
the royal exiles felt more than dazzled
by the play of variety 146

The Ashramas making a Mandala,
and the divers colonies
themselves, were scattered all o'er Dandaka
and essayed a way of life 147

The Rishis were the revered denizens
of the Ashrama clusters,
and were the peaks of the human species
the Leaders, the pathfinders 148

They were of either sex, and could be saints,
scholars, poets, priests, prophets,
scientists, educators, advisers
householders or sannyasins 149

They were humankind's privileged vanguard
winning their way to the heights
by the askesis that opens the door
to intuitive leaps of thought 150

But the Rishis—aye, the greatest, wisest
and the most celebrated—
even they weren't formulas or bloodless
or passionless abstractions 151

They could lose their temper at times, or curse
or invite imprecations,
they could savour the throb of wedded love
or play a Minister's role 152

In a theatre of uncertainty
where the gods and titans hurled
menace at one another, the human
Rishis served as equipoise 153

In some of the half-inaccessible
Ashramas, austerity
reigned with ochre as the ruling colour
and silence as mode of speech 154

But this silence, pairing with a constant
 smile of infectious kindness,
 or a look of serene understanding,
 was more eloquent than words. 155

An unflickering smile — a child's, a saint's,
 a mother's — or a steady
 spraying of compassion and communion
 could invoke infinities, 156

for 'twas like the welcome rain-bearing cloud
 showering largesse of Grace
 on everybody, on all visitors,
 and sinners seekers alike. 157

'Twas thus a marvellous education
 for the royal wanderers
 to move from Mandala to Mandala
 and meet the enlightened ones. 158

No doubt the encounters with the Rishis,
 anchorites and ecstasies
 weren't all of a piece but differed greatly
 with place, time and circumstance. 159

It seemed odd to Rama and Lakshmana,
 and forbiddingly bizarre
 to Siṣa, that some of the ascetics
 of the outer settlements, 160

and some in the peripheral regions,
 should fancy acrobatics
 or resort to ingenious gymnastics
 or extreme self-denial. 161

Some seemed suspended upside down, their legs
 pointing to the azure sky;
 some stood in neck-deep or nose-deep water
 in a smelly blackish pond. 162

Some were in meditation, but in league
 with frightening privations
 like sticking thorns into the cheeks or tongue,
 lying on a bed of nails, 163

stepping in and out of a pit of fire,
 clutching a knot of vipers,
 letting scorpions crawl over the body,
 or abjuring food and sleep. 164

And some displayed a crown of prickly pear,
 or a serpent round the neck;
 and thus did they inflict a thousand ills
 on the innocent body. 165

Whenever the travellers came across
 such grotesqueries or grim
 exhibitions of asceticism,
 Sita reacted strongly. 166

While Rama and Saumitri felt amused,
 awed, diverted or repulsed,
 Sita's trembling heart evoked the Mother
 incarnate in the Earth-born, 167

the inherent universal Mother
 who suffered the wounds herself:
 "Oh these misguided athletes of Yoga
 that persecute their bodies! 168

Why hang suspended by a hand or leg
 from the tree, or sit rooted
 to the earth letting creepers grow around
 or sparrows perch on the head? 169

Ah there! ant-like clay-galleries cover
 that ascetic, all except
 his eyes, and I wonder how long he has
 wallowed in this misery! 170

See, see, there's yet another ascetic,
 his right hand holding a pot
 of Tulsi, and his promiscuous nails
 displaying a labyrinth! 171

Where's the merit in such self-inflictions,
 such declarations of war
 against the diverse limbs and their freedoms,
 or their natural functions? 172

What passion, pride or perversity drives
 these fanatic ascetics!
 or does it all spring from the dark dungeon
 of their spiritual pride? 173

Isn't the body the Temple of the Lord?
 Why, then, this mangling, maiming,
 mutilation of God's tabernacle?
 What vandalism is this! 174

Haven't I seen in Mithila my father,
 and *jnāni* Yajnavalkya;
 and in Ayodhya too, such lighthouses —
 Vasishta, Vamadeva! 175

They fancy no vagabond contortions
 of the body, nor impose
 on themselves a knotted extravagance
 of bodily chastisement. 176

Ever inly tuned to the Infinite,
 the steady Light within casts
 a luminous halo of holiness
 on their commonest actions. 177

All errors and perversions of human
 behaviour must proceed from
 the mind's suggestions, vital impulses;
 and the body's not to blame! 178

Wasn't it an aberration to chastise
 the loyal executant
 for the sins of egoistic desire
 of one of several kinds? 179

Deprivation but sharpens and heightens
 the denied appetite, and
 only awaits a break to rage again
 with a redoubled fury. 180

It's not the rejection of God's blessings
 but their grateful acceptance —
 in a mood, not of pride, but detachment —
 that shows the play of wisdom." 181

Then, turning to Rama, she said: "My Lord,
 both when the Vicegerency
 sought you, and as it withdrew and exile
 came as your sceptre and crown: 182

you sported a look of transparency
 beyonding all attachment;
 Rama, this I believe is the truer,
 purer, asceticism! 183

In this our world, be it town, countryside
 or the woodlands wild like these
 stretches of Dandakaranya, you find
 beauty — beauty — everywhere. 184

Reject it, and where do we go? Deny
its sweetness, manifoldness, —
how can we? Let's still, like little children,
cherish Mother Earth's blessings. 185

Rama, Rama, how can these ascetics
seek to run away from life
when life, life, life is the triune splendour
of Light, Love and blessedness?" 186

Rama's set face broadened into a smile,
and he made answer: "Sita,
such wisdom and forthrightness race beyond
your years, and I'm proud of you. 187

It's as you say, Sita; misery comes
from the adhesion to things:
and when you're free within, nor acceptance
nor rejection enslaves you." 188

By and by, the exiles learned to avoid
the more particular haunts
of the ascetic exhibitionists
and their grim self-torturings. 189

And there were the numerous Ashramas
authentic to the marrow
set in gardenscapes with all the allure
of the sapphire of the skies. 190

Some of these more spacious hermitages
and their appurtenances
were geared to the tasks of educating
princes and commoners both. 191

It was living and learning and growing
at once, and the physical
at the base to the Spirit at the top
made an arc of Becoming. 192

For the royal travellers, these visits
were an education too;
and 'twas strange, they thought, they owed this blessing
to the venomous crookback! 193

The art of teaching in these Ashramas
seemed to follow a pattern
of prime austerities encompassing
their due realisations. 194

The body beautiful, wholesome and strong
 was charged with the Spirit's glow,
 and this was the crown of the askesis
 of the interlocking limbs. 195

Those of faultless bearing and behaviour
 had achieved a mastery
 over the conflicting life-impulses,
 and acquired poise and power. 196

The discipline of the mind's faculties
 of wideness, comprehension,
 choice and proper direction crystallised
 in sovereignty of Knowledge. 197

The askesis of self-discovery,
 the tracking down and finding
 of the illimitable Soul within,
 crowned Love as the law of life. 198

This fourfold *śādhī* of Beauty, Power,
 the light of Knowledge and grace
 of Love prepared the beneficiary
 for the tasks of the future. 199

Integrally the bud-like neophyte
 opened up gradually,
 and he was scholar, warrior, statesman
 and the Divine's serviteur. 200

In some other Ashramas, secluded,
 exclusive and redolent
 of sanctity, the happy travellers
 breathed a paradisaal air. 201

Offering obeisance to king-sages,
 saint-hermitresses and Bards
 endowed with the Vision and Voice divine,
 the travellers felt fulfilled. 202

What prophet caverns, what lucent corners,
 what elect sanctuaries,
 what potent cells of the Spirit were these? —
 for glory hung about them. 203

One of the venerable Patriarchs,
 ageless in his appearance,
 taught by his mere presence; and his silence
 was sublime teaching enough. 204

When the youthful aspirant travellers,
 after paying obeisance,
 settled themselves at the great Rishi's feet,
 a peace descended on them. 205

A marvel of benignity and calm,
 the Seer-Rishi exuded
 serenity as he sat statuesque
 under an Aswatha tree. 206

There was a pale glow on his countenance,
 his bright eyes seemed to convey
 a nectarean message, and he sat
 in throned immobility. 207

How was it, Sita thought, that some minutes
 of this sustained exposure
 somehow engineered a vast inner change
 bringing down a peace divine? 208

Was it the Light of transcendental Truth
 that filled everything and made
 the spectacle of multiplicity
 a splendid unity? 209

Sita could see how the disprivileged
 of the world — the blind, the mute,
 the waifs, the possessed — found in that silence
 the solvent of their problems. 210

On the move again, they were attracted
 by one of the populous
 Ashramas on the main, and were received
 with warmth by the residents. 211

The splash of ochre was hardly the rule,
 for the middle-aged Yogi,
 a householder, was clad in purest white
 and his smile was disarming. 212

It was a child's smile, the smile of candid
 babyhood, and his consort
 was also in white, and her black flowing
 tresses backgrounded her face. 213

The yogi spoke softly to the exiles
 and invited them to stay
 for as long as they liked, and Maithili
 felt drawn to the Yogini. 214

Although his antecedents were obscure,
 clearly the Yogi was one
 who had taken the Kingdom of Heaven
 by the storm of his ardour. 215

He had small learning, the smile on his face
 was askesis without tears,
 or rather with tears of joy; and he taught
 through proverbs and parables. 216

The Yogini's presence and unhurried
 movements carried an aura
 that was like an affirmation of Light,
 a promise of victory. 217

One of the younger Yogins, a savant
 and ochre-robed gospeller,
 admitted that reason always stopped short
 of the plenitude of Truth. 218

For the exiles, it seemed a life without
 tension, or questions, or doubt.
 but Dandaka was large, and they resolved
 to continue their travels. 219

Canto 26: Designs for Living

And so the travellers, their faculties
wide awake and responsive,
moved from one Ashrama to another,
eager to visit them all. 220

What really surprised them was the startling
variety in sanctity —
the goodness, holiness, sheer godliness —
that unfolded everywhere. 221

Yet for those pilgrims of Eternity
self-absorbed in *tapasya*,
sudden interruption or disruption
could come from the titan-hordes. 222

Rama's presence in Dandaka, no doubt,
kept the Rakshasas contained,
and the Rishis also had learned to live
with the menaces around. 223

As the orderly itinerary
of the exiles' journeyings
took them deeper into the fastnesses
of the uncharted forest, 224

they made a rapid circuit of a whole
range of unconventional
aggregations with their own distinctive
philosophies of living. 225

Many only reaffirmed the values
of Sanātana Dharma
with but peripheral innovations
in theory and practice. 226

In one, the entire emphasis centered
in the esoteric art
of awakening the Kundalini,
the Serpent Power within. 227

In another, the presiding Yogi,
a figure exuding charm,
offered a ready infallible clue
to the quantum leap from here! 228

- A few, however, seemed to be engaged
in the diversionary —
the deceptively occult — or even
the blandly hedonistic; 229
- and reckless apostles weren't hesitant
to exhort: "Stoop to conquer!
No inhibitions! Taste life to the lees!
Forward to self-mastery!" 230
- As if it's pouring ghee upon the fire
that extinguishes the flames!
Yet 'twas thus these schools of self-indulgence
entangled the unwary. 231
- They came, it seemed, in obese battalions
from the Rakshasa strongholds
in Lanka, or the remoter reaches
of Dandaka and beyond. 232
- Wherever ill gotten affluence reigned
in unholy alliance
with an inexhaustible appetite
for the forbidden fruit-tree: 233
- the doomed darlings of those spendthrift regions
made a bee-line to these spots
lured by their audacious recipes for
happiness everlasting. 234
- But the wandering exiles, having been
warned of the insidious traps,
avoided by infallible instinct
these dangerous enclosures. 235
- And there were the old-world hermitages
where the young travellers saw
how the perennial wisdom of the land
lighted up everyday life. 236
- The elders were an alchemic presence,
and the seekers with their sure
psychic responses learned with no effort
and matured their perceptions. 237
- And so, with Rama leading the others,
the exiles turned their journeys
into adventures of discovery,

In one of the Ashramas, the Rishi
gave the visitors a smile
all-sufficing, touched their secret heart-strings,
and sprayed them with his blessings. 239

In another, crowded with disciples,
the clairvoyant Madonna
wore a far-off look, as if wandering
in realms remote from the earth. 240

But in a third, packed with an assortment
of admirers, the Master
purveyed paradoxes making the lie
glisten as the grander truth! 241

"Didn't we hear something like this, Maithili,"
Rama whispered, "from dear old
Jabali at Chitrakuta? Ah let's
get away from this folly!" 242

Some hours of leisurely walking brought them
to a richly organised
Ashrama, and the royal travellers
were received with warmth and joy. 243

The majestic Head of the Mandala
discoursed on the close nexus
between the physical and the occult,
and the master-key to both. 244

Even as he was speaking, with a wave
of his hand as if blessing,
he would materialise out of the air
a flower, fruit or feather, 245

a talisman, a piece of adornment,
or a message in parchment,
and present it to one or another
of the rapt congregation. 246

The listeners were a miscellany
made up of the well-to-do,
the learned ones, as also the wretched,
the unredeemed of the earth. 247

As for Sita and the royal Brothers,
they sat apart for a while
till the Sage saw and called them, and they had
a fruitful conversation. 248

- He explained that human nature varied
a great deal and demanded
divers approaches for encompassing
the inner awakening. 249
- Faith came to some from a sudden shower
of Grace; to some by sheer force
of the Sadguru's personality
or his miraculous moves. 250
- There were no miracles, in fact; only
the push of the leverage
at the right time; and all means were valid
in the Battle of the Soul! 251
- On the days following, the Travellers
savoured of the ambience
of the spacious grounds where the old and young
found living an adventure. 252
- Of prime appeal to Sita, however,
was the chanting of Vedic
Hymns irresistibly evocative
of the worlds invisible. 253
- Continuing their peregrinations
in the wilds of Dandaka,
the exiles uncannily avoided
the Rakshasa settlements, 254
- for there was something like a Grand Trunk Road
linking the main Ashramas;
and the Travellers knew a stone's throw out
on either side of the main, 255
- and they might encounter the messengers
of Falsehood and the prowlers
of the Night on their rounds, and so preferred
to evade them if they could. 256
- The well-adjusted and long-established
Ashramas were still headed
by Rishis of renown whose intuitive
Knowledge shone on their faces; 257
- whose vision grasped all past, present, future,
and the triple worlds; whose voice
with its native *mantric* resonance linked
the human and the Divine; 258

- whose sudden self-lost trances were a means
of tearing through Space and Time
and roaming in the realms of transcendence
removed from our solid Earth; 259
- and always the aspirant Travellers
felt purified and greatened
by the Presence and Grace and golden Voice
of these vicegerents of God. 260
- The charged atmosphere of these Ashramas,
the teams of Rishis expert
in ritual, the resounding Vedic
Riks, and the choice oblations: 261
- the Halls set apart where the Mystic Fire
was invoked, consecrated
and worshipped: the entire environment
seemed to exude sanctity. 262
- Now unhurrying Time had swept away
days, weeks and months totalling
a decade and more, out of the decreed
fourteen long years of exile. 263
- 'Twas a pensive evening, calm and peaceful,
and Sita spoke to Rama
with a sweet smile: "We seem almost to have
fallen in love with this life. 264
- But for your firm promise to Bharata,
this our life exempt from care
and the reign of routine might make us want
to grow foresters for good!" 265
- They laughed, and walked on for a while further,
and now there suddenly swam
before their view a scattered colony
at some distance to the left. 266
- Approaching by a faint footpath, they read
at the gateway the legend
'Arc of Harmony' in gold lettering,
and they wanted to explore. 267
- Receiving a warm welcome at the first
orchard with its own cottage,
they fraternised with the inmates, and learnt
the history of the place. 268

- Arising out of the heaven-splendoured
 Vision of Rishi Satya
 that the intestine feud between Deva
 and Asura was annulled: 269
- the successor spirit, Ganga Mata,
 ordained into existence
 this Arc of Harmony, this Home for All, --
 gods and titans and humans. 270
- It was a mighty challenge to translate
 a Dream or psychic Vision
 into an everyday reality
 of transparent Brotherhood. 271
- "All went well indeed," the spokesman explained,
 "'twas the birth of a New Age!
 The wolf, the lamb and the shepherd essayed
 togetherness and kinship. 272
- The fellowship in learning, work, prayer;
 the united endeavour
 to scale the craggy and spiralling slopes
 of the Hill of Consciousness; 273
- the great attempt at a progressive pace
 to grow out of the shackles
 of inhibitions, mental constructions:
 all this was fascinating, 274
- and the community waxed in numbers,
 and the cooperative
 adventure of the Arc of Harmony
 looked like fulfilling itself." 275
- Now a pause almost ominous followed
 before the speaker, after
 a silent exchange with his companions,
 could continue his story: 276
- "Your youth and the spiritual halo
 about you compel respect,
 and you're surely of royal lineage,
 not the ascetics you seem. 277
- Our Satya's bright Vision of the Future,
 our Ganga Mata's dream-child,
 our inherited Arc of Harmony,
 has alas! now come to grief, 278

Can it be, O prized visitors, you've come
as delegates from Beyond —
in hermit weeds but in warrior-stance —
to redeem us from our ills? 279

And O Bride of auspicious circumstance
and compassionate Mother,
from what privileged heavenly domain
have you strayed into this Arc?" 280

'Twas Lakshmana who gave a brief reply
about their antecedents,
the current penitential wanderings
and commitment to Dharma. 281

And in conclusion he asked: "But you spoke
of ills that afflict the Arc;
we don't understand — why should a Vision
of Glory fail in the test?" 282

The little group was perceptibly awed
to learn the identity
of the visitors, and the spokesman said
with a reverential bow: 283

"This our unfulfilled Arc of Harmony,
this choice stretch of bleeding earth,
feels truly sanctified by your coming —
now our redemption is sure. 284

Our Satya's Dream, our Gaṅga's Will, decreed
an integral harmony
of birth and state, and fellowship of race
and sex, of men, gods, titans. 285

We knew that the divisions meant nothing,
for the essential Deva
or Asura was within, and frail Man
could be one or the other. 286

But we had the native freedom to think,
and make our choice, and become
the ideal Man that combined the best
of Deva and Asura. 287

But sometime ago, a rift opened up
and widened venomously,
and now the splendid Arc is split in two
and discord alone prevails. 288

We the few here, we were the pioneers;
 we welcomed others, we turned
 the first sod, and we laboured together;
 and we're here, hoping, praying. 289

When you pass the next barrier along
 the footpath, the fork sunders
 the Mandala into the hemispheres,
 with a grim divide between. 290

In the early years, the Truth of oneness
 of man, god and the titan
 reigned as the very breath of our being,
 the very law of our life. 291

The giddy euphoria of the times
 made us lose our discretion,
 and all and sundry — with diverse motives -
 infiltrated amidst us. 292

And immaturity made us fall for
 numbers more than quality;
 and one day the community split — and
 the Arc is a shambles now. 293

We had commenced in our happier days
 a sadhana of service,
 a many-tiered architectural
 spalling of consciousness. 294

It was to be structured as a symbol
 movement of Aspiration
 from the seven Vestibules of Darkness
 to the seven Stairs of Light. 295

All lent a helping hand in the quarries,
 wrestled with recalcitrant
 rocks, hauled up heavy stones, and everything
 as service and offering. 296

I used to think this was like the Churning
 of the Ocean, with Devas
 and Titans in the joy of adventure
 to win the ambrosial prize, 297

But a clique of dissidents gained control,
 decreed a vertical split,
 and like people possessed began scuttling
 the bright Future we had launched. 298

All righteous effort is at a standstill,
 and whole heaps of energy
 are being frittered away in wrangles,
 division and sabotage. 299

And that's the sad history of the Arc
 that has crashed, but the embers
 of the Fire are kept alive in our hearts,
 and we've not ceased to hanker." 300

While the recital had a depressing
 effect on the visitors,
 Sita expressed the desire to get close
 to the scene of the dispute. 301

The spokesman of the firstcomers offered
 to show the Travellers round,
 and the next day they covered the two split
 hemispheres of the fabric. 302

The twyfold damaged Arc of Harmony —
 the One now cut into Two —
 made similar claims and allegations
 cancelling out each other. 303

And both sides appealed to Rama as Prince
 to intervene and ordain
 a new Order; and also begged Sita
 to make the Dream live again. 304

When they viewed the vast divide and beyond,
 Rama's face was a mask, and
 Lakshmana's impassive, but Maithili's —
 a requiem for a defeat! 305

"Must it always be like this!" she exclaimed;
 "I and you, and mine and thine;
 North and South, and West and East — the Abyss
 for all! May Grace redeem us!" 306

And Rama said in parting: "Despair not,
 Visionaries of the Arc;
 rise to the plateaus of the Higher Mind, —
 you'll forge Harmony again." 307

Leaving that word of goodwill, hope and faith,
 the royal exiles retraced
 their eager steps to the Grand Trunk Pathway
 and persevered in their quest. 308

Canto 27: Agastya and Lopamudra

At last the rhythm of their wanderings
encompassed a full cycle,
and they arrived once more at Sutikshna's,
and offered him obeisance. 309

After a few days' rest and inner peace
they sought the Sage's counsel:
where could they meet the revered Agastya
of whom they had heard so much? 310

They hadn't come upon his place anywhere
in the clusters they had seen,
and feeling a yawning incompleteness
they prayed for right direction 311

Sutikshna answered with a smile: "Indeed,
it's proper, you meet the Sage
four Yojanas to the south, and you reach
a seductive upland spot, 312

and Agastya's brother, Sudarsana,
has his hut among the groves;
if you proceed after a good night's rest
a Yojana further south, 313

you will attain Agastya's Ashrama,
a rich woodland paradise;
and the Sage and his spouse, Lopamudra,
will both receive you with love." 314

The flame-word struck a quick responsive chord
in attentive Sita's soul,
for since her early childhood days she had
felt the magic of the name. 315

A legend in her nonage days, a star
apart in the spangled sky,
Lopamudra was an emanation,
a life-ray for womankind. 316

Sita recalled her prior communings
with paragons of the race,
like Gargi, Maitreyi, Arundhati
and the reborn Ahalya. 317

Then, in the first phase of her forest life,
 the sainted Anasuya;
 now, moving towards the end, she will meet
 the matchless Lopamudra! 318

With Sutikshna's blessings, the royal three
 commenced their journey again,
 and by evening they reached Sudarsana's
 secluded place in the woods 319

It was shaded by pepper trees and groves
 weighted with flowers and fruit,
 and the worthy Sage, Agastya's brother,
 gave them a hearty welcome. 320

He spoke of Ilvala and Vātāpi,
 their reign of terror, and how
 Agastya destroyed those demons, and fair
 new times began for the South. 321

Resuming their journey at dawn, Rama,
 Sita and Saumitri took
 the footpath to Agastya's hermitage
 rimmed by luxurious trees. 322

Set in the heart of the jungle wildness,
 the Ashrama exuded
 a peace unearthly, for Agastya's name
 expelled all forms of evil. 323

The puissant enlightened Sage extended
 his spiritual domain
 o'er both sides of the Vindhya, north and south,
 and practised his ministry. 324

Seated before the sacrificial Fire,
 the luminous Sage received
 the obeisance of his three noble guests
 and gave his benediction. 325

After oblations in the holy Fire,
 the Sage offered fruits and roots,
 and while he engaged the brothers in talk,
 Sita sought the Rishi's wife. 326

The reality of the embodied
 Shakti, the fusion of grit
 and Grace, the tall presence, the charisma:
 these surpassed expectation. 327

The imperious Lopamudra's smile
 was for Sita a charter
 of acceptance, and the two established
 an instantaneous rapport. 328

"You needn't tell me, I know the whole story,"
 said the prophetess at once;
 "and I commend your courage and marvel
 at your total affiance. 329

Life's not easy, dear, for the likes of us,
 we're the exceptional ones;
 you are the earth-born found in a furrow,
 and I was a foundling too. 330

Mithila's King gave you name and nurture,
 as Vidarba's did to me;
 the birth-time mystery still rings us round,
 and the odds are against us!" 331

"But why?" asked Sita in her innocence;
 "for my own generation
 you've been the seven-splendoured rainbow arc
 of puissance and perfection." 332

"The gilded butterfly! the golden lamb!"
 came the withering reply;
 "glitter is not gold, and gold is not life,
 and seeming is not being. 333

Married to sanctity or royalty,
 you hug illusions — my lord
 is my god, or my hero, or my child,
 but not my peer or comrade! 334

There's doubtless the legend of difference
 between the male and female
 of the human species — we're called the fair,
 the frail, aye, the weaker sex! 335

And the curse of custom accentuates
 this slick physiological
 difference and rears a grim edifice
 of behavioral ethics. 336

When the baby is born, there isn't all that
 mighty emphasis of 'weak'
 and 'strong' and the child is cherubim-like,
 a descent from the Divine. 337

The naked and just-born splendour of life
 comes from a distant region,
 defies all degrees and categories,
 and is steeped in sovereignty. 338

And yet, the dead weight of the unconscious,
 the well-settled prejudice
 and the blind unreason of the ages
 close upon the growing child. 339

Nature's economy of arrangement,
 the stress on the minimum
 variation to perpetuate the race,
 becomes inflated ere long. 340

The blind and witless forget that beyond
 body and passion and mind
 there's nor male nor female in the ocean
 infinitudes of the soul. 341

Yet Man and Woman are riven apart,
 they're pushed to opposite poles,
 and they tamely submit to being judged
 by rival weights and measures. 342

The fair grow fairer still with unguents,
 adornments and jewellery;
 women are soft-spoken, their speech is like
 music—golden, their silence! 343

A whole cyclopaedia of do's and don'ts
 for the Woman, contrasted
 with a flagrantly opposite guide-book
 for the domineering Male. 344

'Don't speak too loud!' the hapless girl is told;
 'Don't walk too fast, don't come out
 of the cribbed security of the home;
 in or out, obey the male! 345

O engage, if you will, in childhood games,
 play the nurse with pretty dolls,
 or act the sage mother with other girls,
 or chatter with your parrots! 346

Marry at the proper time, bear children;
 and let the sons and daughters
 grow and evolve like different species—
 and don't presume to question! 347

And look, Sita, how from his very birth
 the boy has a privileged
 upbringing; he's the superior sex,
 the ruler, fighter, killer. 348

His childhood toys are soldiers, his boyhood
 occupation is playing
 with bows, arrows, axes, maces, tridents,
 and dreaming of streams of blood. 349

Alas, alas, what a mess humankind
 has made of the gifts of Grace
 vouchsafed equally to men and women
 by the Mother of us all! 350

Always the excesses of Asuric
 pride or of Rakshasa spite,
 the eruption of malice, anger, lust,
 must spell Woman's misery. 351

But where shall we find strong enough language
 to castigatè the folies
 and crimes, the jealousies and revenges,
 of the mindless human male? 352

But, Sita, it's mighty gratifying
 you have declined to be scared
 by the Unknown, and are willing to share
 the trials of the forest. 353

This lunatic division of labour —
 Woman for the home, and Man
 for the battlefield! — has driven a wedge
 and splintered humanity. 354

While the sons get trained to become killers
 in the horrid game of war,
 the daughters get entrapped in the male's net
 of pride, possession and lust. 355

Sita my child, and Rama's bride, you'll be
 the mother of his children,
 and always every mother dies almost
 to bring new life to the world. 356

O Maithili, schooled in great Janaka's
 domain of lucent knowledge,
 let not the burden of my dissidence
 render you apprehensive. 357

But you do seem to carry the halo
 of the indwelling Divine,
 and though I may have scared you with this talk,
 I'm glad you're inviolate. 358

Go forth, brave Vaidehi, walk unafraid
 and resolute, and perhaps
 even this is the kind of askesis
 all womankind asks from you! 359

O my dear Sita, may the Light Divine
 hem you round like a fortress
 of triple brass, and throw back and bury
 the ten-limbed monster of Night!" 360

Just then the Princes came, and Rama said:
 "See how the Sage has blessed us—
 the Bow of Vishnu matched by Brahma's dart,
 and Indra's sword and quivers. 361

As for the remnant of the exile left,
 he suggests the riverside
 Panchavati two Yojanas yonder;
 let's take his blessings and leave." 362

The inscrutable Sage, his regal Spouse,
 the resident anchorites,
 all wished the Travellers well: Rama led.
 Sita, Saumitri, followed. 363

Fondly gazing at the receding forms
 from the Ashrama's gateway,
 the couple exchanged apprehensive looks,
 and Agastya said, "Let be!" 364

But Lopamudra's vision was disturbed,
 the prospective road seemed blurred
 by a cloud cluster, and her woman's heart
 rebelled, though she held her peace. 365

Perhaps the Rishi felt, for all his poise,
 a searing mysterious
 twinge of pain in uneasy alliance
 with a far deeper remorse. 366

He turned to rebellious Lopamudra,
 met her stern questioning gaze
 that carried an accusatory as well,
 and found words and voice at last: 367

“We may have won our plenitudes of Light
by reason of askesis
spread over a countless number of years
and the Grace of the Divine. 368

We’re doubtless blessed or burdened — with a sight
amazingly wide-ranging,
a simultaneous embrace of the past,
present and all the future. 369

But these dazzling vistas of percipience
come always with a blinding
effect and even as you think you see,
perhaps you see less or more, 370

and alas! a slight shift in perspective
can confuse our perceptions
and wheedle us into fateful errors
of reasoning and action. 371

I think I see the unfolding drama
of the mighty opposites,
the gallant Kakutstha and the demon
ruler of distant Lanka. 372

This Rakshasa holds sway o’er Dandaka
from the Janasthana base;
and he has charged with their defence Khara,
Dūshana and their army. 373

Rama’s exile and the tribulations
of Sita and Saumitri,
albeit ostensibly Kaikeyi’s work,
have wide ramifications. 374

I’ve a hunch that before the exile ends
Rama will meet Ravana
in a definitive grapple of arms
hence my gift of potent shafts.” 375

With a lightning flash from her shining eyes
Lopamudra intervened.
“Yes, but while the warriors raise all hell,
what happens to Maithili? 376

This roving piece of Earth-born innocence
who seems a sweet summary
of the holiness of woman’s beauty,
what’s her role in this drama — 377

this unending fight for supremacy
 between the vulnerable
 powers above and the adverse forces,
 Asura and Rakshasa? 378

In a stance of robust affirmation
 she has followed her husband,
 ready to face the dangers of the woods,
 all the winds, wet and wildness. 379

But as I saw her pure crystalline eyes
 a grim cloud floated across
 and a trembling seemed to shake my whole frame —
 I had to hold myself back. 380

Is it fair, my Lord, that for the age-long
 sins of rivalry between
 the cosmic powers, the Earth-born Sita
 should become a helpless pawn?" 381

Sage Agastya stood uncertain, puckered
 his eyebrows perceptibly,
 and as if hedging with circumspection,
 spoke out of a vast unease: 382

"I don't think you should thus distress yourself,
 for you're wise, Lopamudra,
 and you're aware of the imperatives
 of the cosmic masquerade. 383

Blest are the multitude from whom is hid
 the confusing alphabet
 of the strange agenda of the future:
 God holds them as hostages! 384

And of course the omniscient Source-of-all
 has hold of the master-key;
 but we the vain and foolish half-knowers
 must needs wallow in the fog. 385

All I can see is the vague marshalling
 of rival groups of forces
 and the possible ultimate outcome —
 but the details elude me. 386

Given the sweep of probability,
 another action-sequence
 must soon start, and it's my premonition
 Sita too may be involved. 387

Since I'm ignorant of the specifics
of Space and Time, or even
of the contending personalities,
I can but wait on events. 388

But Lopamudra, you're gifted above
all womankind, and indeed
where are the men either that can truly
equal your understanding? 389

Not for one like you these harsh forebodings,
these mounting apprehensions!
Know that Maithili, both in alliance
with Rama and by herself, 390

she the Earth-born now come with a mission
of change and transformation,
carrying Agni in her heart of ruth,
she can suffer and redeem. 391

The eclipses, the long nights of the soul,
the prison-cells of the Dark,
all are passing shadows, fading phases —
the Grace must triumph at last!" 392

"So be it, my Lord, said Lopamudra,
and their eyes met, and they knew
that the royal exiles would be able
to race past the dark tunnel. 393

After one more glance of benediction
at the retreating figures —
three diminishing forms making one flame —
the pair walked back to their hut. 394

Canto 28: **Panchavati**

And soon, crossing the Mahua forest
and drawing near the mountain,
the exiles saw perched on a banyan tree
a bird-like immensity. 395

On inquiry the answer came: he was
Jatāyu the Vulture-King,
Dasaratha's loyal friend, who would now
look after the exiled three. 396

And Jatayu discoursed knowledgeably
on the beginnings of Life.
on the progenitors of the species
so many and so varied; 397

of Kardama, Kasyapa; of Daksha,
and of his sixteen daughters,
two of whom — Diti and Aditi — bore
the Asuras and Devas. 398

Another daughter, Tamra, was mother
of Kraunchi, Dhritarashtra,
Bari, Suki, Syeni — and these in turn
mothered many a species: 399

owls, vultures, swans, hawks, eagles, and so on —
the earth has since been peopled
by apes, bears, elephants, monkeys, horses,
deer, cows, tigers and serpents. 400

And mankind, the progeny of Manu;
all flora, Anala's; and
Suki's granddaughter, Vinata, mothered
Aruna and Garuda. 401

Concluded thus the sweeping history:
Aruna's sons by Syeni
were the royal vultures, lords of the sky,
Sampāti and Jatāyu. 402

Listening to Jatāyu's long recital,
they marvelled at the vulture's
firm grasp of the inter-relationships
between all living species. 403

And it was comforting to find in him
 a trusted family friend,
 for the jungle around was infested
 with wild life and Rakshasas. 404

Arrived at Panchavati, the spot marked
 by five stalwart banyan trees
 fringing the perennial Godavari
 and the hill-ranges beyond: 405

enviored by Nature's munificence,
 deer, swans, peacocks, lotus pools,
 all the luxury of flower and fruit,
 and riot of sound and scent! 406

With his strength of limb and rare expertise,
 out of bamboo and other
 ready materials, Lakshmana raised
 a little hermitage there. 407

It called for sustained labour, and judgement,
 and talent for processing;
 and Sita marvelled how perfectly had
 Saumitri mastered the art 408

Now after the propitiatory rites
 they occupied the small hut,
 and in a surge of gratitude, Rama
 embraced his peerless brother. 409

Time stalked in its easy native rhythm,
 and the river, hills and plains,
 the concert of Nature's opulences,
 enlivened their daily life. 410

And once more the season of autumn passed
 and winter's weeds were welcome:
 and on the way to the river at dawn
 Saumitri murmured his thoughts: 411

"We're forest-dwellers, and austerity
 becomes our hard way of life;
 the wild westerly is our music sweet,
 and this bareness is bounty. 412

But why must Bharata, for Kaikeyi's
 sin, opt for the ascetic's
 role on Sarayu's banks, and quite abjure
 his princely privileges?" 413

"Think not ill, Lakshmana, of our royal
 mother!" admonished Rama;
 "but I agree there's none like the high-souled
 and unselfish Bharata." 414

They had then a bath in Godavari,
 and Sita was resplendent
 in that hour of dawn, and after *sandhya*,
 all three walked back to the hut. 415

Later, their morning's devotions over,
 they relaxed among the trees
 fed on fond remembrances of persons
 and places and racial myths. 416

And suddenly there was a disturbance
 in the quiet wholesome air,
 and they observed advancing towards them
 a female dark and daring. 417

A Rakshasi, perhaps, from the jungle
 fastness of Janasthana;
 a creature of massive mould, with a mien
 arresting and aggressive. 418

Sighting that handsome lion-limbed hero
 lily-blue in complexion
 and a head of glorious matted hair,
 she visigned the God of Love. 419

Announcing her presence she said: "Know me
 for Surpanakha, younger
 sister of great Ravana, Lanka's King;
 and humans! who may you be?" 420

"I am King Dasaratha's son, Rama"
 he said; "this, my wife Sita;
 and here's Lakshmana, my younger brother;
 we're forest-dwellers by choice." 421

Stricken with instant infatuation
 for the bewitching brothers,
 she felt the stir of peremptory lust
 and demanded compliance: 422

"Look on me, Rama, with a loving eye;
 I am black but beautiful;
 what have you to do with that pale creature?
 You're mine by right, let's away!" 423

Rama was overtaken by surprise,
and merely exchanged glances
with Sita and Saumitri, as one caught
in a strange embarrassment. 424

Thinking that Rama was directing her
to unattached Lakshmana,
the demoness turned to him hopefully,
but he showed mere abhorrence. 425

Marking the strange mixture of amusement
and rejection in their looks,
the jealous Rakshasi, with blood-shot eyes,
leapt on terrified Sita. 426

But Lakshmana sprang up in her defence,
there was a brief fierce scuffle,
and with blood flowing from her nose and ears
Surpanakha fled howling. 427

Still in terror and trembling, Sita cast
a vague apprehensive glance
on the yelling and maddened Rakshasi's
dishevelled receding form, 428

and gazed with gratitude at the panting
Saumitri, and met Rama's
quizzical smile, and wondered wistfully
what the future had in store. 429

"It's an ill omen, view it how you like,"
said Sita with grave concern;
"my premonitions hiss like snakes, for this
incensed tigress means mischief." 430

Rama gently answered: "We aren't to blame,
she brought it all on herself;
caught in the criss-cross of causality
let's hold ourselves in patience." 431

Meantime Surpanakha sped as one mad
calling down imprecations
upon the humans who had rebuffed her,
and made for her brother's place. 432

The imperious Khara held his Court
in Janasthana's fastness,
while Dūshana, Trisiras and others
were in constant attendance. 433

The bizarre entry of Surpanakha, —
 wild-eyed, blood-dripping, cursing, —
 caused much commotion in the Assembly
 and Khara rose to inquire: 434

“Who’s it, Surpanakha? God, Gandharva,
 ghoul, who has done this to you?
 Hapless sister, only name the culprit,
 and I’ll avenge this outrage.” 435

The fire of her fierce resentment, being
 fed by Rama’s scorn and fanned
 by Lakshmana’s chastisement and Sita’s
 triumph, was ablaze sky-high. 436

Panting and fuming and shedding hot tears,
 that Fury incarnate asked
 for Sita’s, Rama’s and Lakshmana’s blood,
 for thus must she quench her thirst! 437

Khara sent fourteen of his warriors,
 and spying their approach,
 Rama asked his brother to guard Sita
 as she retired to a cave. 438

Brief was the struggle, for the veterans
 succumbed to Rama’s shafts, and
 witnessing this outcome, Surpanakha
 fled in dolour to Khara. 439

Her horrendous howl and accusing taunts
 stung her brother to order
 general mobilisation and swing
 into punitive action. 440

Heaving like the disturbed sea, the mighty
 army led by Dūshana,
 Trisiras, Syenamāli, Durjaya
 marched towards Panchavati. 441

But lone, indomitable and immune
 stood the rock-like Raghava,
 and the Rakshasas who led the attack
 were thrown back wave upon wave. 442

Immense in his sole self-sufficiency
 Rama faced the enemy —
 whether fourteen or fourteen thousand strong! —
 and outmatched the combined strength. 443

- A scene with ominous implications:
 here Sita safe in her cave
 with the fully armed Lakshmana on guard;
 and there, beyond the clearing, 444
- Surpanakha amid the trees watching,
 waiting, wailing, despairing;
 and the battlefield in between — Rama
 against the Rakshasa hordes! 445
- The gods hovered high above, the Rishis
 in anxious groups held counsel,
 and the whole earth like a plateau unfirm
 tottered on its foundations. 446
- For a sustained unrelieved span of time
 Khara had held in ransom
 the blessed Knights of the Light of Knowledge
 and ruled Dandaka by fear. 447
- From a distance, Ravana's sovereignty
 o'erflowed to Janasthana
 where reigned the perversion of righteousness,
 the paramountcy of Might. 448
- Rama's coming — once with Visvamitra
 when, no more than a boy, he
 killed the dreaded Tataka with a shaft,
 and Subāhu too, her son — 449
- and now, as engineered by Kaikeyi,
 the needed second coming
 with Saumitri and Mithilan Sita,
 attendant Power and Grace! 450
- Portentous were the possibilities:
 hopefully, Light's renewal,
 the decimation of the night rovers,
 or — God forbid! — the false Dawn! 451
- The menacing Rakshasa battalions,
 their gorgeous pennons flying,
 deployed in fourfold formation heavy
 and ingenious armament: 452
- not bows and arrows alone, but also
 battle-axes, clubs, spears, swords:
 and, at a pinch, even rocks came handy,
 mountain-crests, uprooted trees! 453

From a thousand directions the assault
 seemed to converge on Rama,
 drown him under a shower of quick darts,
 and make him invisible. 454

This unequal battle, with one bowman
 pitted against so many,
 elicited concern as well as praise
 from the celestials above. 455

But as the Sun rises and the mists clear,
 Rama's glory blazed again
 and the attackers fell in heap after
 heap, their weapons, mounts and all. 456

The gods, Siddhas, Charanas were intrigued:
 was it magic or maya
 that executed so infallibly
 the doom of Khara's forces? 457

The pennons and loud pageantry of war
 were a sham and mockery;
 and repulsed Dushana, when he returned,
 lost his arms, and then his life. 458

And still the battle raged in redoubled
 fury, and the gory field
 was a spread of the dead and the dying,
 of broken mounts and weapons. 459

And others fell with precipitate speed
 till the ranks of the gallant
 commanders thinned, and only two were left:
 Trisiras and brave Khara. 460

As seasoned Trisiras launched his attack,
 Rama's sharp hissing missiles
 intercepted him like a blast of death
 and felled down the three-headed. 461

With Trisiras dead, Khara was the sole
 dispenser, and felt burdened
 by his importance and fatality:
 'twas only 'Kill or be killed!' 462

Now after some hot verbal exchanges
 Khara went all out to fight,
 and in the bitter engagement hurled mace,
 tree, whatever, came to hand. 463

But repulsed and hit, his body streaming
 with blood, he charged on Rama,
 who drew back and released a fatal dart
 that ended his life at last. 464

While the observing celestials rejoiced
 at the outcome, Rama rushed
 to the cave, to be met by expectant
 Lakshmana and Maithili. 465

There was Rama striding towards the cave,
 his whole body dripping blood,
 the hero who had single-handed faced
 and destroyed Khara's army. 466

Hadn't she once taunted him in her anger
 as woman in man's disguise,
 a paper-hero? Now she sprang forward
 to greet her warrior-spouse. 467

In a leap of joy at seeing her Lord
 in such triumphant array,
 Sita seized his bruised glowing body,
 and her touch was balm to him. 468

And 'twas transcendent joy indeed to her
 that Rama's great victory
 won the high acclaim of the gods above
 and the ascetics around. 469

Canto 29: The Golden Deer

But already, from the dismal wreckage
of the battlefield, the sole
Rakshasa survivor, Akampana,
had hastened to Ravana. 470

The grim report of annihilation
of Khara's armoured forces
threw the King into a fit of fury
spuming out instant revenge. 471

But Akampana warned against any
frontal attack, for Rama
was invincible; 'twould be wise to opt
for a subtler strategy: 472

"Rama dotes on his chaste young wife, Sita,
a beauty without a peer;
and were she carried away by deceit,
he would shrivel up and die." 473

With alacrity Ravana agreed,
and seeking out Maricha - -
fell Tataka's son — begged him earnestly
for advice and assistance. 474

"Desist, O King!" urged Maricha, "from this
unbecoming adventure;
I've reason to know it's playing with fire:
go back to Lanka in peace!" 475

A commotion awaited Ravana
on his return to Lanka,
for Surpanakha had arrived just then
and was raging unrestrained 476

From her perch among the trees she had watched
in growing trepidation
the depletion and final destruction
of Khara's army immense, 477

and this eclipse of her hopes of revenge
had thrown her into a swoon;
reviving, and kindling her hate anew,
she had rushed to Lanka's King. 478

She was terrible to behold, for her
 unfulfilled lust and revenge
 gave a vicious twist to her messed-up face,
 and she screeched and hissed and screamed. 479

She arraigned the mighty and haughty King
 for his blind and slothful ease,
 his indifference to affairs of State
 and his gross self-indulgence. 480

His extensive dominion was shrinking,
 his authority dying,
 mere humans were setting his writ at naught
 and o'errunning his outposts. 481

She stopped in exhaustion, but in answer
 to Ravana's inquiry
 waxed rhapsodic about Sita's person
 and Rama's peerless prowess: 482

"Sita is Rama's wife and she lights up
 the woodlands of Dandaka,
 even as the deathless indwelling soul
 illuminates the body. 483

She's the ensemble of all perfections,
 her complexion purest gold;
 her holiness of beauty and fiery
 chastity mark her sublime. 484

O King! I thought her worthy of your bed
 and grabbed to bring her to you,
 but Lakshmana grappled with me, released
 Sita, and disfigured me. 485

Arise, O King, and seize fair Sita, and
 shame Rama and Lakshmana:
 revenge enough for the army you've lost
 and my own mutilation!" 486

All Asuric nature feels allergic
 to spiritual beauty,
 and breeds an irresistible desire
 to enact desecration. 487

Goodness is a pure gemlike tongue of flame
 that blazons forth its challenge
 and invites the denizens of the Dark
 to a suicidal race. 488

Sita the angel fair, chaste and holy,
 the Light of the wide world's Life:
therefore the temptation, *therefore* the fall,
 the succumbing to evil! 489

Wily Akampana had dropped the hint,
 and far-seeing Maricha
 had warned the King against the poison seed;
 but now a sister's prodding: 490

"This Sita isn't like the routinely fair
 you've oft collected before:
 Sita, even like her handsome Rama,
 signifies the Ultimate. 491

Her light-glancing steps make the earth feel blest
 by the soft tread of her feet;
 the music of many sylvan voices
 merges in her native speech. 492

Her rich flowing tresses are bewitching,
 cloud-like dark, and rain-like too;
 she's a visitant here from far heaven,
 a rare phantom of allure. 493

Her face has the sweet charm of the lotus;
 her eyes, deeper than the sea;
 her breasts, like twin cups of gold, body forth
 the rapture of paradise. 494

How can I describe, O royal Brother,
 what defies analysis?
 Her beauty beyonds the categories
 and strikes one both blind and dumb! 495

This unearthly marvel of a woman
 who teases you out of thought
 may be savoured only by possession —
 arise, and claim your guerdon!" 496

Evil-prone and lust-driven as he was,
 Ravana reached for the bait,
 and as though vowing 'Dark, be thou my Light!'
 perfected his strategy. 497

He lost no time, and his swift chariot
 flew him to Maricha's nook,
 but o'ercoming his shock and awesome fear,
 the seasoned Rakshasa said: 498

- "O mighty King! what's this insanity?
 Did I not warn you before?
 Years ago, and while still a boy, Rama
 killed my mother Tataka — 499
- aye, the one whose name rumbled like thunder
 in Dandaka's wide spaces —
 and killed brother Subahu, and cast me
 hundred Yojanas beyond. 500
- And still I learnt nothing, and persisted
 in my cannibalistic
 blasphemies, and roamed in the forest main
 mingling with the sharp-horned stags. 501
- Years later, when they were exiles themselves,
 once I rushed upon Rama,
 and again his dart helped me flee its wrath
 and take refuge in this place. 502
- Since that act of Grace, I'm not what I was,
 I recoil from the old lusts,
 I respect Sita and her chastity,
 and see Rama everywhere. 503
- O King, trifle not with divine Sita,
 nor the supermen, Rama
 and Lakshmana, lest total destruction
 submerge the Rakshasa clan." 504
- Having heard with a scowl, Ravana said:
 "I need no counsel but help;
 decoy the brothers as a golden deer —
 I'll seize her and come away." 505
- Feeling half-dead almost, Maricha moaned:
 "Those that are to be destroyed,
 O my King, are stricken with madness first;
 I see you're beyond reason. 506
- Twice has great Rama spared me already,
 now let me die at his hands;
 but this will mean catastrophic ruin
 for the Rakshasas — and you!" 507
- Contented with Maricha's acquiescence,
 Ravana invited him
 into his car which now sped in the air
 to the woods of Dandaka. 508

Alighting near Rama's Ashrama grounds,
 Maricha transformed himself
 into a dream-made gem-inlaid golden
 deer, and frisked about freely. 509

The deer was a ravishing pied beauty
 and marvellous to behold;
 its body a synthesis of Nature's
 graceful lines, hues and rhythms. 510

As it gambolled in seeming abandon,
 the splendour of its body
 and the speed of its movements lighted up
 and quite enlivened the woods. 511

And Sita saw, while gathering flowers,
 this marvel of creation
 and drew Rama's as well as Lakshmana's
 gaze to the wonderful deer. 512

A glance was enough, and Lakshmana said:
 "This is but old Maricha
 in disguise, who used to haunt the forest
 and persecute the Rishis." 513

Enamoured Vaidehi, however, spoke
 with feeling: "This enchants me,
 for nowhere have I seen such seduction,
 such brilliance, such golden fur. 514

O let me have it, my Lord, for a pet,
 for a creature of delight;
 and even the skin of this shining deer
 will be a rare souvenir." 515

And Rama felt the fascination too:
 "Real or witchcraft, this deer
 captivates the eye—no wonder Sita's
 heart has been bewitched by it. 516

No matter, Lakshmana: I'll get the deer
 alive or dead—but stay here,
 and keep guard o'er Sita till I return;
 and there's Jatayu, besides." 517

Rama then sauntered forth with a winged
 step, and sword, bow and arrows;
 but as he pursued the ravishing deer,
 it seemed to play hide and seek. 518

Farther and deeper into the forest
 it lured him, so close always
 yet so elusive, inaccessible,
 so deft, so tantalising. 519

Now as the scintillating wonder-deer
 continued to tease and trick
 the panting Rama, he decreed its death
 and released a fiery shaft. 520

Exploding like thunder, the great missile
 hit the deer, lifted it high,
 and hurled it down with a deafening crash,
 now in its Rakshasa form. 521

But ere he expired indeed, Maricha
 of mountainous dimensions
 simulated Rama's voice as he cried:
 "Ah Sita! ah Lakshmana!" 522

Rama remembered Lakshmana's warning,
 saw deceit in Maricha's
 dying wail, and felt a nameless unease
 about the consequences. 523

And, indeed, the false deer's heart-rending cry
 threw Sita into a fit,
 and she urged Lakshmana to go in search
 of his endangered brother. 524

But Lakshmana didn't stir, being aware
 of Maricha's sorceries;
 and could he, remembering Rama's word,
 leave Maithili defenceless? 525

Marking his disobedience, Maithili
 lost her head altogether
 in her concern for Rama, and spoke words
 like scalding sulphurous fires: 526

"What's this, Saumitri, you seem to rejoice
 in Rama's extremity!
 Your brotherly solicitude, a show?
 Or, are you Bharata's spy? 527

Perhaps you have evil thoughts towards me,
 O insufferable one!
 Having had Rama as my Lord and God,
 where is another for me? 528

I'll take poison, or hang myself, or leap
 into the ravenous fire;
 or I'll seek ready release by plunging
 into the Godavari!" 529

'Twas hell for Lakshmana to see Sita,
 her eyes ablaze with anger,
 her body a heap of shivers and tears,
 her mind seething in turmoil. 530

But 'twas worse to hear her pitiless words,
 her burning accusations;
 and she wasn't calm enough to think about
 Rama's freedom from danger. 531

In deep anguish he said: "My obeisance
 to you, the Divine in you;
 although you now talk like a wild woman,
 I'll not answer but forget. 532

I'll go to Rama, since that is your wish:
 may the Gods look after you,
 for the omens I see are frightening,
 and I'm full of forebodings." 533

Sita was the image of misery
 as sad Saumitri withdrew,
 and still he cast anxious backward glances
 while moving away from her. 534

Canto 30: The Abduction of Sita

With Lakshmana chased away, Sita was
alone in the hermitage:
this was the chance Ravana had schemed for,
and this was his tryst with Doom. 535

Assuming with cunning and contrivance
a sage ascetic's disguise —
water-bowl, triple staff, ochre-raiment —
he approached the Ashrama. 536

Nature seemed to feel the intimations
of the evil invasion,
a graveyard silence lay like a pallid
cloak over the hermitage, 537

the Godavari flowed uncertainly
as if psychically hurt,
and Ravana's blasphemous presumption
sent a tremor through the earth. 538

Supporting his vile impersonation
by reciting the Veda,
he approached the apprehensive Sita
and made pressing inquiries: 539

“Who are you, bride of forest loneliness,
flame-born attired in saffron,
decked with choicest flowers and bewitching
with eyes that enchant at once? 540

Are you a nymph descended from heaven,
the sum of all perfections,
every limb its own archetype, O great soul
of modesty, heir of grace! 541

O ravisher of transcendent beauty,
aren't you the Goddess of Love
enslaving beholders with your smile, eyes,
tresses, teeth, thighs, breasts, nipples? 542

This nook is not the place for you, nor can
this seclusion become you;
you deserve the splendours of princely life,
palaces and pleasancess. 543

- Paradigm of youth and beauty and love,
 how were you lost among these
 untamed occupants of Janasthana —
 demons, tigers, elephants?" 544
- More and more uneasy at the tenor
 of the speech, she was also
 mindful of her Dharma as a housewife,
 and asked him to take his seat. 545
- While she went through the motions of formal
 welcome to the guest, Sita
 awaited anxiously the safe return
 of Rama and Lakshmana. 546
- The nearer Ravana came to Sita
 the fire-icon of Beauty,
 his desire raged the more, and he resolved
 to seize and take her away. 547
- Unaware of her guest's identity
 or duplicity, Sita
 in her innocence told her history,
 of her marriage to Rama, 548
- of Kaikeyi's ruse to get him exiled,
 and the rest of the story;
 and Sita in turn asked her guest about
 his name and antecedents. 549
- Now he said without more ado: "I am
 Ravana, Lord of Lanka,
 dreaded by all; my women are nothing
 compared to you whom I love. 550
- Come with me to Lanka, girt by the seas
 and nestling on a mountain:
 become my Chief Queen, O beautiful one,
 and end this harsh forest life." 551
- The words stung her, and she flared up like an
 infuriated cobra:
 "Rama, my Lord and my God, is the cream
 of human excellences. 552
- What criminal presumption, what folly,
 to lust after Rama's wife!
 Such a paragon as Rama to you,
 as Lion to a jackal, 553

as the wide ocean to a mere trickle,
as pure gold to base iron,
as the royal elephant to a cat,
as rarest sandal to mire. 554

I am not isolable from Rama,
for myself, myself, am he:
and Rama is elemental Power,
and endless benevolence. 555

Oh you desire me? As well seize the Sun,
pluck the hill-top, walk on pikes,
prick your eye with a needle, lick a blade,
or drain a cup of poison!" 556

She trembled all over as she finished
speaking, like a plantain leaf
tossed by the wind; but Ravana only
raved in self-praise as before. 557

He boasted of his air-car, Pushpaka,
of the terror in which all
Nature held him, of his Lanka City
and its riches manifold. 558

How small in comparison was Rama:
wasn't he an exiled weakling?
a feckless mendicant? Ravana's thumb
was mightier than Rama! 559

Still fuming with anger, Sita replied:
"You are Varuna's brother,
yet wish to do evil, which must destroy
the entire Rakshasa race. 560

It is easier far, O treacherous one,
to wrest Sachi from Indra
than me from Rama, for though you might quaff
nectar, Death will seize you still." 561

Reacting to Sita's open disdain,
Ravana shed his disguise,
waxed huge in his native Rakshasa shape,
and loomed fearful to behold. 562

Once more he boasted of his immense strength
and variety of exploits,
of the greater joy she would find in him
than in the worthless Rama. 563

Then in frenzied hurry, with his left hand
 he seized Sita by her braid
 and with his right hand carried her by force
 to his waiting chariot. 564

Mother Earth and all Nature felt the wound,
 the sylvan Presences fled,
 and the humped silence of the Ashrama
 was shattered by Sita's cries. 565

What's this worse than devastating disease,
 this aberration called lust,
 that seems able to turn the afflicted
 into their own enemies! 566

First Surpanakha, with her violence
 of desire for Rama, makes
 a peremptory claim, and seeks instant
 fulfilment, and is repulsed. 567

In the fury of her unquenched desire,
 she turns against Maithili,
 and provokes the backlash of chastisement,
 and even disfigurement. 568

For one Surpanakha inflamed with lust,
 fourteen thousand have to die
 on the gory fields of Janasthana
 stained with the ascetics' blood. 569

The demon-sister, her thirst for revenge
 unassuaged but in league
 with the still consuming lust for Rama,
 turns promptly to her brother. 570

Lust and revenge thus act on each other
 and extend their dominion:
 violence lays waste the garden of Life,
 and lust the flowers of Love! 571

The sacrifice of the fourteen thousand
 doesn't deter Surpanakha
 from initiating another sortie
 into forbidden pastures. 572

By her report, Ravana feels possessed
 and moves with rapidity
 from the thought of avenging the fallen
 to lusting after Sita. 573

Too long a slave to his evil passions,
 self-adoring Ravana
can forget all ties of State and kinship,
 and forge his own disaster. 574

He sheds no tear for Maricha's demise
 but seizes the proffered time
to play his cunning and cowardly act
 and carry Sita away. 575

Even thus adamant Fate nooses
 the formidable Titan
with the gnawing creepers of his own lust
 and encompasses his doom! 576

Canto 31: **Jatayu**

But for the nonce, all foul was waxing strong,
the Thief was getting away
with Sita wailing dolefully aloud
feeling abandoned and lost. 577

She gave out piercing screams calling upon
'Rama! Rama!', and the name
resounded in the woods, while already
the chariot rose above. 578

Thus driven to the brink of stark despair,
she raised her voice still higher
and cried: "Ah Lakshmana, I didn't heed you,
I'm being carried away. 579

Can this be, O Rama, O Lakshmana!
is there no swift punishment,
O upholders of Dharma! It may be,
retribution comes with time! 580

Kaikeyi may now feel joy in my woe,
but O foolish Rakshasa,
this is verily the seed-time for your
destruction at Rama's hands. 581

As the car speeds on, all Janasthana
seems to race back in a whirl:
O Godavari, O Prasravana,
O you gods of the forest, 582

O you sylvan spirits and guardians
of the Dandaka forest,
O you birds, beasts, trees, creatures all, report
my misery to Rama!" 583

Now it came like a stab of memory,
the nightmare that had rocked her
in Mithila, when the hooded serpent
reached for the innocent dove. 584

How uncannily that murderous act
had warned her of things to come:
and was there hope of instant rescue from
the hydra-headed monster? 585

Yes, an eagle or a vulture, she thought,
 might give ferocious battle
 to the mighty hydra-like Ravana,
 and effect her own release! 586

Now espying Jatayu on a tree,
 but knowing his age, Sita
 begged him not to give fight to Ravana,
 but inform Rama in time: 587

“O you most revered Vulture, Jatayu,
 mark this infamous outrage
 by the unspeakable Rakshasa King—
 tell Rama about my plight.” 588

Awakened from his doze, the Vulture took
 the situation at once
 and appealed to Ravana to refrain
 from his outrageous intent: 589

“I speak as King to King, and she you have
 forcibly seized is the wife
 of Rama, Ayodhya’s King: you’re to help,
 not molest, another’s wife. 590

Remember, a King is the sustenance
 and source of moral action,
 and his example decides how the mass
 of his people will behave. 591

Your current conduct errs against Dharma
 and calls for condemnation;
 and not all your past good deeds can save you
 from the wages of this sin. 592

When did Rama injure you? And as for
 Khara, he went in support
 of vengeful Surpanakha, and thereby
 drew red ruin on himself. 593

But I warn you, Ravana, having sown
 the wind, you’ll reap the whirlwind;
 your action is like grasping a serpent,—
 verily the Noose of Death! 594

What, you wouldn’t listen? No, you shall not pass!
 I’m old and feeble, you’re strong
 and armed; I’ll fight you yet and bar your flight
 to Lanka with Rama’s Queen.” 595

This plain-speaking by Jatayu inflamed
 the impatient Ravana,
 who was in no mood for words of wisdom
 or timely admonition. 596

Forthwith, from his seat in his car, he launched
 a vigorous offensive
 raining fast-speeding darts with iron tips
 inflicting many a wound. 597

On his part, Jatayu, King of Birds, fought
 back with terrific menace
 deploying his deadly talons to cause
 massive hurt to Ravana. 598

The Rakshasa renewed his offensive,
 but Jatayu defied him
 and smashed with his feet the bejewelled bow
 of his mighty opposite. 599

Thus clashed they like fierce wind and massive cloud
 with the attendant lightning
 and thunder; and still the Rakshasa charged,
 and still the Bird held his own. 600

Shaking off the swarms of shafts, Jatayu
 battered the air-car, and killed
 the adroit charioteer as also
 the swift and seasoned horses. 601

Losing these supports, Ravana jumped down
 with Sita still in his grip,
 and continued the fight with Jatayu
 as if to a bitter end. 602

Viewing the King of Birds at close quarters
 and judging him exhausted,
 Ravana would have gladly flown away,
 but Jatayu blocked his path. 603

A fierce engagement followed, the King Bird
 used his talons, beak and wings
 to good effect, and pecked at and wounded
 and disfigured Ravana. 604

Now, in an accession of rage and shame,
 he freed himself from Sita,
 engaged in a death-grapple with the Bird,
 and cut off his wings and claws. 605

Thus crippled by the cruel Rakshasa,
 Jatayu fell in a heap
 in a pool of blood, and stricken Sita
 ran fast to his side and wept. 606

“Alas, calamity is heaped upon
 calamity,” Sita moaned;
 “O my Rama, are you not still aware
 of what has overtaken me? 607

Nature is a web of relationships,
 and there are intimations
 from bird-cries, movements of beasts, and other
 stale everyday happenings. 608

Has nobody — nobody — reported
 my tragic predicament?
 And this heroic Bird too has fallen —
 ah, such is my misfortune!” 609

Once more the Rakshasa King grasped her plait,
 lifted her trembling body,
 took off with her from the ground to the sky,
 and flew with maddening speed. 610

It seemed as if a blinding lightning-flash
 had ripped a mountainous cloud;
 or a raging fire consumed a hill-range;
 or a comet sought its doom. 611

In this intimately interwoven
 single-thread network, a jerk
 anywhere causes tremors everywhere,
 and there's no insulation. 612

Ravana's mad act of desecration,
 a crime against the ancient
 sanctities, smashed the cosmic symphony
 into a scream of chaos. 613

It was as though Nature's sustaining Law
 denied itself and blasphemed:
 salt lost its savour for the nonce, water
 froze, and darkness reigned at Noon. 614

The terrible spectacle of Sita,
 her hair dishevelled, her voice
 hoarse crying ‘O Rama, Rama, Rama,’
 her sweat melting her *tilak*; 615

Nature felt shamed and paralysed by this
 horror of the lecherous
 Ravana making off with Maithili
 defying the universe! 616

Now alarmed that she was being carried
 farther and farther away,
 Sita addressed Ravana yet once more,
 and mounted her indictment: 617

“Deceitful and cowardly Ravana!
 having first decoyed Rama
 with the deer and Lakshmana by its cry,
 you came when I was alone. 618

‘Twas all baseness, magic and trickery,
 and now you’ve struck down the Bird,
 the aged friend of King Dasaratha —
 this is not prowess at all! 619

Where’s heroism in your snatching away
 another’s wife, or killing
 the aged, or evading a straight fight
 with Rama and Lakshmana? 620

Where’s your vaunted courage? You seem afraid
 to stop, lest the two Princes
 return, give fight and fatally pierce you
 with their invincible darts. 621

Aye, to be seen by them even would cause
 your instantaneous collapse,
 O Ravana, — like a hapless bird caught
 in a blazing forest fire! 622

And banish all thought of my agreeing,
 for I’ll sooner die; and mark
 what I say: I see grim Death tightening
 round your neck his fateful noose! 623

I warn you, Ravana, the universe
 will take up arms against you,
 the leaves of the forest will become swords,
 and rivers will flow with blood.” 624

And so Maithil writhed in Ravana’s
 fiendish grip, and as he raced,
 her admonishings and lamentations
 merged with her curses and tears. 625

But marking on the way a mountain-top
where she saw four Vanaras
huddled, she dropped among them her jewels
tied up with her shoulder sash. 626

She hoped the Vanaras would give Rama
this evidence of her flight,
and as Ravana was too self-absorbed,
he didn't notice her action. 627

The bundle fell in their midst, but before
the Vanaras could give chase,
the Rakshasa had gone past hill and lake,
and vanished into the air. 628

Meanwhile the obsessed Ravana sped on
heading fast towards Lanka
flying on the way o'er the Pampa lake,
and forests, hills and rivers. 629

Like a shaft from a bow, Ravana flew,
and the seething southern sea
with its whales, crocodiles and foaming waves
loomed ominously ahead. 630

Canto 32: Rama Disconsolate

While Sita was terror and tears, a torn
leaf buffeted in a storm:
in the far Dandaka interior
Rama was in deep anguish. 631

The deer's eerie dying cry made him fear
that mistaken Maithili
might drive Lakshmana to his brother's help,
leaving herself defenceless. 632

Maricha's wizard-act, his decoy feat,
his impersonating cry,
all added up to a conspiracy
meant to trick and trap Sita. 633

As Rama, greatly concerned, took quick strides
homeward, a jackal's weird howl
threw him almost into desperation,
and he had wry misgivings. 634

He feared the worst, for the Janasthana
titans had reasons enough
for enmity,—had he not quite destroyed
the Khara-Dushana hosts? 635

He quickened his steps, and the forest beasts
nestled sadly around him,
and the birds circled over, emitting
a chorus of doleful notes. 636

And he saw Lakshmana at a distance,
and on his face there was death:
misery met the miserable, and
guilt and guilt met face to face. 637

In their fatality of misery
they hurled recriminations;
and caught in twists of perverse circumstance,
they felt trapped, cheated and lost. 638

Rama blamed his brother for deserting
Sita, and Lakshmana could
only cite Sita's peremptory fear;
and the two wailed together. 639

Lakshmana wearily explained: "‘Go, go!’

Sita repeatedly urged,
accused me of indifference or worse,
and threatened to kill herself. 640

I pleaded you were invulnerable —
the Voice an imitation —
the whole act a fraud and a snare! — yet she
ordered I should look for you." 641

"Alas, Saumitri!" Rama made reply;
"that was a frenzied woman's
outburst; you should have ignored it, and not
succumbed to anger yourself." 642

They had by now reached the Ashrama grounds
and they searched frantically
without and within, but to their distress
she was nowhere to be found. 643

Rama felt distracted, his left eye throbbed,
a paralysis of will
seized him, he made spasmodic moves, he wept
thinking about Sita's fate 644

Lakshmana shadowed his stricken brother,
and as they looked for Sita,
now in the Grove, now near the lotus pool,
and now at the forest-fringe, 645

everywhere they found Nature in a swoon,
the birds silent, the flowers
dull and drooping, the beasts sullen and sour,
and the whole landscape frigid. 646

And Rama, in an explosion of grief
and pain, rushed from tree to tree
or from pool to hill or bird to river,
and asked for news of Sita. 647

The *kadamba*, *arjuna*, *asoka*
kakubha, *karnikara*,
punnaga, *kuravaka* — the distraught
Rama moved among them all, 648

as also the forest's teeming fauna,
deer, elephant, bear, tiger,
and made pathetic inquiries mingling
fancy, fact and anxiety. 649

Receiving no answer from tree or beast,
 Rama thought Sita had been
 eaten by the cannibal Rakshasa.
 or slaughtered and cast away. 650

Rama recalled Sita's thousand graces
 of form, deportment and speech,
 and his fevered consciousness imagined
 dreadful possibilities — 651

how excruciating her sufferings were
 as she was being devoured —
 and blaming his own failure to guard her,
 he wept inconsolably. 652

“Ah Lakshmana, what has happened to her?”
 Raghava wailed piteously;
 “whither has she gone abandoning me
 and these grieving fawns, her friends? 653

The pangs of parting will drive me to die,
 but what answer shall I give
 when our Father asks why I haven't fulfilled
 my fourteen-year forest-life? 654

All eventualities we've exhausted,
 yet Vaidehi we haven't found;
 my spirits droop, my functions seem to fail,
 and my despair drives me mad.” 655

The pitiful sight of Rama's anguish —
 akin to an elephant's
 when stuck in a mire — unnerved Lakshmana,
 and he tried the healing touch: 656

“An end, O mighty-armed, to this session
 with dejection! All's not lost,
 there are places — caves, orchards, riversides —
 still unvisited by us. 657

Perhaps she has gone for a bath, perhaps
 she is just hiding from us;
 let's comb the forest with diligent care,
 and, maybe, we'll find her yet.” 658

With revived hope they now renewed the search
 and looked for lost Vaidehi
 everywhere — in caves, on lakeside, hillside,
 riverside, or wherever. 659

But when Sita was nowhere to be found,
 Rama's spirits drooped again,
 he reeled under his burden of sorrow
 and sank down shaken by sobs. 660

And all Lakshmana's acts of persuasion,
 all his attempts to console
 the stricken Rama, failed altogether,
 for he only moaned and groaned: 661

"Ah Sita, you're hiding yourself from me —
 perhaps behind the plantains,
 or the Asoka or Karnikara —
 but a truce to this teasing! 662

Yet no! she'll not let me suffer like this!
 look, look at these deer, their eyes!
 the tear-drops say Sita has been devoured
 by the evil Rakshasas. 663

Where, where are you, O fair and noble one!
 Can I, coward that I am,
 go back to my Ayodhya without her,
 or face her royal father? 664

For Queen Kaikeyi at least, this my date
 with sorrow will be a time
 of fulfilment; I don't think I'll return
 to Bharata's Ayodhya. 665

And Lakshmana, get back to the city,
 for I'll not survive Sita;
 yes, tell Bharata as from me, he's free
 to rule the Kingdom for life. 666

Also, pay my obeisance to all three
 mothers, and tell Kausalya
 the news of Sita's end, and the reason
 for my withdrawal from life." 667

Thus wallowing in extreme misery,
 Rama cursed the wretched fate
 that piled up loss upon loss, and this worst
 of all, the loss of Sita. 668

He lingered with excruciating detail
 on the fright and pain and shame
 that beautiful Sita would have suffered
 before death overcame her. 669

Perhaps the Rakshasas, having carried
 away Sita with her curls,
 slit her neck at last and drank her blood while
 she wailed like a wounded bird. 670

Lamenting the startling turn of events,
 Rama wondered in his grief
 whether he hadn't sinned greatly in past lives,
 and was now reaping the fruit. 671

Might it not be that Maithili, lover
 of rivers, lakes and woodlands,
 had strayed away somewhere? But Rama knew
 she was too timid for that. 672

In his extremity, Rama queried
 the Sun and the Wind whether,
 travelling everywhere as they did, they
 could give him news of Sita. 673

Finding Rama's distress unbearable,
 Lakshmana pleaded with him
 not to lose heart but face difficulties
 manfully and master them. 674

Like one distracted, however, Rama
 begged his brother to find out
 if Sita was at the Godavari
 gathering the lotuses. 675

The errand was to prove unavailing,
 and now they went together
 and asked for news from the wild animals
 of the Dandaka forest. 676

Neither they nor the Godavari would
 reveal what they had witnessed,
 for they were scared of the Rakshasa King
 and of his fierce reprisals. 677

But when Rama repeated his request
 (for he thought they knew the truth),
 the forest denizens unitedly
 made a meaningful gesture. 678

In solemn silence they rose together,
 and their agonised eyes arched
 from the sky above to the earth below,
 and pointed towards the South. 679

Reading the message, the brothers turned south,
 and on the way saw faded
 flowers on the path which Kakutstha knew
 Sita had worn earlier. 680

While they were closely pursuing the trail,
 Rama caught sight of foot-prints
 signifying a harsh struggle between
 Sita and the Rakshasa. 681

Looking intently, the brothers could see
 that a fierce battle had raged
 between two warriors, for broken bows
 and arrows lay on the ground. 682

There were other tell-tale vestiges too:
 a shattered war chariot,
 the fallen asses and charioteer,
 the torn flag and umbrella. 683

These picturesque and dismal reminders
 of a sanguinary fight
 and the thought of Sita's possible death
 threw Rama into a rage, 684

his customary poise deserted him,
 and turning to Lakshmana,
 he threatened to destroy the worlds unless
 Sita was restored to him. 685

In that stance of an avenging Fury,
 he glared and glowed like Rudra
 ready for the tasks of dissolution.
 the destruction of all norms. 686

But Lakshmana gently interceded,
 spoke fair and convincingly,
 and pleaded for calm-reflection, followed
 by seasonable action. 687

"Is it wise," asked Saumitri, "to deny
 your softer human nature
 and desire the destruction of a world
 for just one criminal deed? 688

The ground shows traces of a bitter fray,
 but of a lone chariot:
 'tis clear there was but one culprit — let's not
 lose our sense of proportion. 689

Is it at all likely that either god,
 Gandharva or Danava
 would find delight in your discomfiture,
 or cause you an injury? 690

Let's continue the search in all quarters
 and identify the thief
 who carried Maithili away — and then,
 swift punishment can follow." 691

"Do not forget, O Prince," begged Lakshmana
 firmly clasping Rama's feet,
 "as King Dasaratha's son you become
 an example to others. 692

You told Bharata at Chitrakuta
 that what the Raghu race did
 would be cited as classic norms by folks
 in all the ages to come. 693

If even you, Raghava, will not show
 restraint, how about the rest?
 Rebuffs are the badge of the human tribe,
 but restraint is Wisdom's way. 694

Who hasn't tasted the wormwood, Misfortune?
 Hasn't Yayati? Vasishta?
 Doesn't our Mother herself, the Earth-Goddess,
 know periodic tremors? 695

There's none in all the worlds who can defy
 the Ordainer of Order;
 and the Sun and Moon, the givers of light,
 must suffer eclipse sometimes. 696

The chain of causation, the Karmic Law,
 has an adamant cast,
 and who is immune from its tentacles —
 no, not great Indra himself. 697

Past and present and future are a web
 of delicately woven
 threads of complex inter-relationships,
 and there's no ready escape. 698

All this you've instructed me in times past,
 for what's it you do not know?
 But just now you seem to be in a daze,
 and so I've ventured to speak. 699

I appeal to you, Rama, think again,
 restrain your towering rage:
 it's the sinner we should destroy, and not
 the innocent triple worlds." 700

Won over by Saumitri's reasoning,
 Rama contained his anger,
 and the two started the search in earnest
 looking for clues on the way. 701

And they came upon the gigantic form
 of the fallen Jatayu,
 and mistaking it for Sita's killer,
 Rama seized his bow and shaft. 702

But dying Jatayu spoke to the point:
 "Sita the lady you seek
 has been carried away by Ravana,
 and he has killed me as well. 703

Singly I gave fight to the Rakshasa,
 threw him down and smashed his car,
 but he cut my wings, dealt a mortal blow,
 and flew away with Sita." 704

The revelation caused pain and remorse
 to Rama, who now cast off
 his bow and fell on the footpath where lay
 the majestic Jatayu. 705

Embracing the Vulture King, Rama cursed
 his own fate for the series
 of losses: the Kingdom first, then Sita,
 and now last, his Father's Friend. 706

The brothers fondly stroked Jatayu's limbs
 so awesome and gory still,
 and Rama sought from the dying Vulture
 more details of the outrage. 707

His life fast ebbing away, Jatayu
 described in feeble accents
 Ravana's crime of flying with Sita
 towards the southern ocean. 708

But the King of Birds added that the time
 of the flight was auspicious
 for Rama the loser, and disastrous
 for the guilty Ravana. 709

But before he could say more or divulge
 the whole truth about the flight,
 Jatayu breathed deeply, and breathed his last,
 and his soul left his body. 710

In the death of Jatayu, the Brothers
 lived through their revered Father's
 passing once again, for the two great Kings
 had been allies and good friends. 711

"Alas!" sighed Rama, almost breaking down,
 for death levels everything;
 "This mighty Vulture rushed to Sita's help,
 and fighting, lay down his life. 712

With this act of noble self-sacrifice
 Jatayu covers himself
 with glory, and shows how the soul of good
 can reign in all forms of life. 713

Loyalty and goodness and compassion,
 the readiness to defend
 the injured and insulted, ennoble
 even birds, beasts and the like. 714

With his alacrity in self-giving,
 Jatayu elicits my
 reverence, and it is meet we perform
 his funeral obsequies. 715

So may the righteous soul of the Monarch
 of the Sky's inhabitants
 rise in his native right to the highest
 heaven of transcendent bliss." 716

Lakshmana gathered the needed firewood
 and made the funeral pyre,
 while Raghava cremated Jatayu's
 body in the blazing fire. 717

Then the worthy grief-stricken brothers made
 the prescribed burnt-offerings
 of deer's flesh to the dear departed soul
 speeding its heavenward flight. 718

Next they both offered water libation:
 on the Godavari's banks;
 and, after bathing, libations also
 to Jatayu's ancestors. 719

The Brothers weren't by Dasaratha's side
 when he died in Ayodhya,
and had missed the obsequies, and had failed
 to offer their libations. 720

It solaced them now that they could both watch
 the Vulture King's last moments
and perform his final rites — he had been
 a second Father to them. 721

Canto 33: **Kabanda and Sabari**

Having performed Jatayu's obsequies
with a filial concern,
the Princes with faith in the Bird-King's words
renewed their quest in the woods. 722

They waded through the dense jungle finding
their way with difficulty,
and fully armed with bow, arrow and sword
they journeyed south-westerly. 723

Passing a darkened mountain-cave, they saw
a repulsive Rakshasi
of enormous size and menacing mien
engaged in devouring beasts. 724

Noticing Lakshmana who walked in front,
she seized him with aggressive
lust and announced: "I am Ayomukhi;
let's love and have a good time." 725

Giving no second thought, the disgusted
Saumitri resisted her
causing hurt to the iron-face and ears,
and she ran away howling. 726

As they pushed forward, evil forebodings
assailed Lakshmana about
the near future, and yet not affecting
the ultimate victory. 727

And sure enough, they stumbled soon after
on a dreadful colossus —
a grisly shape with mouth in the belly,
and with neither neck nor head. 728

From something like his solitary eye
blazed a cone of baleful fire;
he roared, and his long arms like tentacles
held the brothers in a vice. 729

The warrior-brothers felt paralysed
for the nonce, and Lakshmana,
resigned to his fate, wanted that at least
Rama should make his escape. 730

Rama too was sore that the whirligig
 of Time threw up reverses
 unimagined, and even the best-armed
 were but thistledowns sometimes. 731

Their drooping spirits revived, however,
 and Lakshmana suggested
 as a preemptive act the severance
 of the arms from the body. 732

And so, before those murderous hands could
 close upon them, Rama cut
 the Rakshasa's left arm and Lakshmana
 the right, and thus freed themselves. 733

The debacle opened the Rakshasa's
 inner eye, and on learning
 who his assailants were, he made humble
 submission to the Princes: 734

"I was once known as Danu in heaven,
 but brought ruin on myself
 and became Kabanda the headless one,
 the eater of animals. 735

I was promised that whenever Rama
 and Lakshmana dismembered
 my arms, that would end the curse, and I would
 regain my Danava self. 736

I beg you now to burn me on a pyre,
 so I'll shuffle off this coil
 and win my true self; and I can also
 be of assistance to you." 737

They gathered shrivelled-up branches and twigs
 and made the funeral pyre
 in a cave, and burnt Kabanda's body,
 and his soul rose like a flame. 738

Reappearing in his effulgent form,
 he advised Rama to seek
 the friendship of Vanara Sugriva,
 for that would lead to Sita. 739

It was wise in times of adversity
 to reach a firm alliance
 with one likewise victimised, for two hurts
 might mutually heal both. 740

Sugriva, deprived of both crown and wife
 by Vali, his own brother,
 was in hiding on Rishyamukha Hill;
 Rama would find a friend there. 741

Vali was the mighty Vanara Chief
 of prosperous Kishkindha,
 and his Queen was the virtuous Tara
 the mother of Angada. 742

Endowed with valour indomitable,
 Vali had killed Asura
 Dundubhi with a wild buffalo's shape
 itching always for a fight. 743

Chasing his son, Mayavi, underground
 in a fight to a finish,
 Vali had left Sugriva to keep guard
 at the gateway to the stairs. 744

But later, when blood came up from below,
 he thought that Vali was dead,
 went back to Kishkindha, and crowned himself
 King of all the Vanaras. 745

'Twas really Mayavi's blood that had surged,
 and so Vali, returning,
 charged Sugriva with treason, and chased him
 out of the Vanara haunts. 746

Vali seized Ruma too, his brother's wife,
 and so hapless Sugriva
 had to take refuge with four followers
 in the Hill sanctuary. 747

This wild and obsessive brother-hatred,
 the incestuous seizure
 and possession of Ruma, had branded
 Vali with a double sin. 748

The Vali that had once noosed in his tail
 Ravana the Rakshasa
 and winged him round and round the earth as of
 insect insignificance, 749

the same Vanara King, albeit Indra's
 emanation, had become
 the sworn ally of the King of Lanka,
 the enemy of the gods. 750

Thus the ally Rama needed was not
 proud Vali but the steady
 Sugriva, for he too had lost his wife,
 and was both truthful and brave. 751

He would be a dependable, mature
 and resourceful ally, and
 the Vanaras could scatter themselves, and
 locate Maithili's abode. 752

Then the resplendent Danu gave details
 of the route to Kishkindha —
 westward through a wood of fruit-giving trees,
 and on to the Pampa Lake. 753

In that delectable region, dowered
 with lotus, lily, osprey,
 swan, and Nature's plenty, there was the famed
 Ashrama of Matanga. 754

The place was still maintained by Sabari
 the old woman ascetic
 who awaited the coming of Rama
 for her date with the Divine. 755

Eastward beyond the Lake lay flower-clad
 Rishyamukha the steep mount,
 a hallowed place quite insulated from
 unrighteous thoughts and actions. 756

In a cave in the mountain, difficult
 of access, lived Sugriva
 and his chosen four Vanaras: and there
 lay Rama's hope of success. 757

Having thus advised Rama, the haloed
 Danu took leave of him, and
 the Brothers, their spirits buoyed up, began
 their trek to the Pampa Lake. 758

Following Danu's precise instructions,
 the exiles wended westward
 finding rest on the hills during the nights
 till they sighted Pampa's shores. 759

First they called on the hoary Sabari,
 for whom this was the crowning
 moment of her sadhana: ecstatic,
 she offered them obeisance. 760

Rama made friendly inquiries about
 her progress in inner peace,
 and she answered that his vouchsafed Presence
 was her life's consummation. 761

Her Gurus had left earlier; she too
 would now trail them to heaven.
 She then fed her guests divine with the fruits
 she had lovingly preserved. 762

Sabari then showed the Princes around
 the blessed Matanga's Wood,
 where all remained as fresh and radiant
 as when the Rishis had lived. 763

The genius of the elected place
 retained the spiritual
 fervour and electric charge of the chants
 and the Gurus' mystic glow. 764

Sabari showed also the wondrous spot
 where the seven sacred seas
 met and mingled together answering
 the aged ascetics' need. 765

Wonders were many in Matanga's Wood:
 the tiger and deer were friends;
 all Nature's opulence was native there —
 'twas an earthly paradise. 766

Breathing that ambience of freedom, and
 her life's aim fulfilled at last,
 Sabari resolved to leave her body,
 and firmly entered the fire. 767

The sight of Sabari's ascent from Earth
 filled their pure minds with delight,
 and feeling sure of better times to come
 the Brothers renewed their quest. 768

As if to forget the incessant pain
 of the cruel severance
 from Sita his beloved, Rama mused
 on the sainted Sabari. 769

The exiles were walking slowly eastward
 past the Pampa as advised
 by Kabanda, and each was in his own
 world of tense introspection. 770

And now Raghava turned to his brother
 and began speaking his mind:
 "Saumitri, what an allegory here,
 this marvellous Sabari! 771

Here was the paradigm of askesis,
 all the ardour and the faith,
 all the painstaking process and the goal, —
 the Bhakta greater than God! 772

The glories of birth are nothing, less than
 nothing; what alone matters,
 the key to the rest, is sincerity,
 the act of consecration. 773

She was a daughter of the wooded hills,
 unlettered, uninstructed,
 but her raw soul was still the genuine thing,
 and aspired for God alone. 774

She sought Rishi Matanga and his peers,
 and they found in her a Pearl
 of the purest white, and she made her life
 a song of adoration. 775

When the raw but the authentic ripens
 o'er a period of time
 into the richest fruit, it's now ready
 at last for the living God! 776

Rishi Matanga had asked Sabari
 to await my arrival:
 O Saumitri, how does my luckless self
 come into their history?" 777

The answer came: "Doesn't it seem strange, Rama,
 that so many — one after
 another: the unseen Ahalya first;
 Viradha the Gandharva; 778

Sarabanga, Kabandha, Sabari:
 all these and more were waiting
 for you to walk their way and sanctify
 the earth, and liberate them. 779

No self-deception, no mean flattery,
 no hallucination, these!
 Ahalya did indeed rise before us,
 and we made our obeisance. 780

Yes, with the evidence of the other
rare apocalyptic scenes,
how may I doubt that some unseen power
is somehow pointing our ends? 781

We see but smallish patches at a time,
and enslaved as we are by
the deceptive present, the synoptic
Vision is denied to us." 782

And Rama said after a prolonged pause:
"There's something in what you say,
O Saumitri, and let's hope Time will now
swing in our favour once more." 783

BOOK FOUR

ASOKA

Canto 34: **Ravana's Lanka**

- Having seized Sita with an exercise
of low cunning and deceit,
choosing the time contrived when both Rama
and Lakshmana were away, 1
- and having fought, disabled and cast down
Jatayu the vulture-king,
Ravana flew over land, lake, mountain
and the deep southern ocean. 2
- And lugging the miserable Sita
raining tempestuous tears,
he reached his well-guarded Lanka at last
and rushed to the gynaeceum. 3
- Whatever the labour and the hazard,
the glorious prize was his!
Alas, 'twas no woman, but his own Death
he had grasped and taken home! 4
- Setting down the disconsolate Sita,
Ravana promptly summoned
a team of trained ogresses and left her
in their circumscribing care. 5
- "Honour and serve her," he told them firmly,
"even as you would myself;
let her have anything she wants — clothing,
food, jewellery, gems or gold. 6
- Death's the answer if you offend by word
or deed, or cause her annoy;
but beware! let none presume to meet her
"unless permitted by me." 7
- For a while leaving Sita to herself
enringed by the wardresses,
Ravana called eight of his smartest spies
and gave precise instructions: 8
- "Make haste to Janasthana, spy upon
Rama my foe number one;
maneuver all devices to entrap
the brothers, and bring me word. 9

Single-handed, as you know, this Rama
 struck down Khara, Dushana,
 Trisiras and fourteen thousand of our
 Dandaka-based Rakshasas. 10

No peace for me so long as Rama can
 wield his bow invincible,
 or loyal Lakshmana stands sentinel;
 the Brothers must be destroyed!" 11

In the meantime, relieved of the hateful
 Rakshasa's proximity
 and unmindful of the environing
 brood of foul demonesses, 12

Sita recalled the magnificent sights
 she saw through the film of tears,
 the hill-top city, the broad streets, the spires,
 the tall buildings, the gardens. 13

As the Rakshasa made the steep descent,
 how the spectacle made her
 think of the years, now grown hazy, at fair
 Ayodhya and Mithila! 14

So she was in the City of Lanka
 in Ravana's sea-girt isle,
 and separated from Rama her Lord
 and the loyal Lakshmana. 15

Her burning eyes wandered 'about the Hall,
 and a sense of revulsion
 caused a tremor in all her shrinking limbs
 as she viewed the wardresses. 16

How long this shame and sorrow, she wondered;
 but surely her mighty Lord
 who laid Parashurama low would now
 break through Lanka's defences. 17

Once more she reviewed the ghastly sequence
 of events: the golden deer,
 the chase, the cry — her panic and frenzy —
 and the false ascetic's swoop! 18

"O the frailty of Woman!" she mumbled;
 she had inferred treachery
 in the blameless Saumitri, but welcomed
 the deceitful anchorite! 19

She had once presumed to advise Rama
 himself, but had been bewitched
 by gold and ochre, thought the false was true,
 and the purest truth was false! 20

Even as she was cursing her folly
 in the entire transaction,
 with remorse for her words to Saumitri
 and contempt for Ravana 21

and surge of gratitude for Jatayu's
 gesture risking his own life,
 there stormed into the Hall with a flourish
 the giddy Rakshasa King. 22

He found her weeping still, and she had spurned
 all offers of gifts of clothes,
 jewels and delicacies; and indeed
 she remained unreconciled. 23

Shaken by her sob, she was a frail boat
 tossed by the wind in the sea;
 and she trembled as might a strayed gazelle
 pursued by a pack of hounds. 24

"Let me show her my aggregated wealth,"
 thought Ravana, "and also
 the impressive façade of my power,
 and the glories of my State." 25

And so he took her by main force around
 his spacious palace complex,
 and let her see heaps of clothes and jewels,
 pearls, rubies and diamonds. 26

And he made her see his high-arching Halls
 with pillars of ivory,
 mosaic floors inlaid with the richest gems,
 and walls and windows of gold. 27

He showed the pleasancess too, the arbours
 manifold, the exotic
 trees with their rare twittering birds, and founts
 and statuary of the gods. 28

Then, suddenly striking an attitude,
 the boastful Ravana said:
 "Look kindly on me, O large-eyed Lady,
 all this, and my life, are yours. 29

Be my Queen, Lady, Chief of my Consorts,
 and rule my realm and myself:
 Lanka is impregnable, neither gods
 nor Asuras can daunt me. 30

Forget that feckless wandering exile
 who's quite unworthy of you;
 your beauty and youth are priceless blessings—
 do not squander them away. 31

Look not for early rescue from Rama;
 you'll never see him again:
 for the sins of past lives, haven't you suffered
 already and far too long? 32

Now at least opt for happiness with me,
 O most ravishing Lady!
 It's time for your good deeds to bear their fruit,
 and we'll all the pleasures prove. 33

Remember I'm the Lord invincible
 of Lanka, the vanquisher
 of Kubera: let's fly the Pushpaka
 and reap the joy of the world." 34

As the obsessed Ravana continued
 in this unbecoming strain,
 Sita hid with her sari's end her face,
 lest it reveal her disgust. 35

But reading her gesture wrong, Ravana
 made a disarming appeal:
 "There's no need for fear, beautiful Sita,
 take me as a gift of God! 36

See, I abase myself altogether,
 I touch your feet with my head:
 never before I've humbled myself thus—
 love me, Lady, marry me." 37

With this stance of abject self-abasement
 the wretched Rakshasa thought:
 "My goddess will now surely condescend,
 and I'll have my way at last." 38

Heaving a deep sigh of pain that arose
 from her mind's lucidity,
 Sita barricaded herself behind
 a mantra-charged blade of grass, 39

and in solemn, simple, seasoned accents
 found the aptest words to say,
 and made clear that Ravana's blandishments
 had had no effect at all: 40

"Must I repeat all I had said before
 in the Panchavati hut?
 I'm the wife of Rama, who killed Khara
 and all his fourteen thousand. 41

Like an eagle with a venomous snake,
 so was he with Khara's hordes.
 You're not invulnerable as you think.
 Death awaits you on the wings. 42

Because of the outrage on Rama's wife,
 you are already a goat
 tied to the sacrificial altar-post
 awaiting your tryst with death. 43

We lived in the forest in the open
 unafraid of your species;
 and when attacked, as by Khara, Rama's
 shaft sped with unerring aim. 44

But like a poltroon you came, Ravana,
 disguised as a mendicant,
 at a time I was alone, and stole me
 like a despicable thief. 45

And you dare to desire me, Ravana?
 Can the contemptible crow
 approach the snow-white swan? or the sinner
 get close to the Sacred Fire? 46

Have you forgotten the one thousand armed
 Kārta-vīrya Arjuna
 who clapped you in prison for years, and was
 killed in turn by Parashu? 47

And this same Rama of the battle-axe
 shrank into unimportance
 and defeat, when my all-powerful Lord
 fronted him with Vishnu's Bow. 48

Kill me if you will and feed on my flesh,
 it's nothing to me at all;
 mere lifeless mud when you seize it by force,

Your grandiose offers are nought to me:
 but by this desecration
 you've only decreed your imminent doom,
 and the doom of Lanka too." 50

Having spoken with a supreme effort
 of will, Maithili relapsed
 into silence; and Ravana, speechless
 with rage, barked out his reply: 51

"Woman, I give you a twelve-month respite
 to fall in line with my wish;
 if you still decline, my cooks will hack you
 and prepare my morning meal." 52

Turning then to the huddling Rakshasis,
 he brutally snapped: "Take her
 at once to Asoka Grove, and keep watch
 o'er her movements day and night. 53

Her spirit should be crushed! Her defiance
 and pride should be tamed, as wild
 elephants are! Tempt her, cajole her, or
 frighten her, but bring her round!" 54

Canto 35: Alone in Asoka

After Ravana had left in a huff,
the complaisant ogresses
guided Sita to a secluded place
in the famed Asoka Grove. 55

As good as its name was the splendid park
with long rows of Asoka,
Champaka and other trees in blossom,
and birds carolling sweetly. 56

There was Naga, mango, Kapimukha,
Uddalaka, Simsupa,
and a host of other tree varieties
deployed in bold formations. 57

Birds in groups flew in and out of arbours
in a gay frolicksome mood,
and small herds of deer, lithe and beautiful,
wandered about aimlessly. 58

And blameless Sita, now all dejection
and stoic resignation,
let herself be led by the Rakshasis
to the heart of Asoka. 59

Her mind was a blank almost, and she walked
mechanically, in step
with her sullen and severe wardresses
as they moved through the garden. 60

Albeit in the daze of continued shock,
Sita couldn't help noticing
the nightingales and peacocks on the way
and hearing their lusty calls. 61

Drawn deep into the Grove's interior,
they had now to negotiate
their way through a maze of flower-laden
creepers woven with climbers. 62

And soon enough they reached an open space
and saw pools with pellucid
water, and the steps were inlaid with gems,
and the floors seemed crystalline. 63

Trees of lavish growth and weighted with fruit
 environed the central Lake
 where lilies were in blossom, and the air
 echoed with the cries of swans. 64

Sita saw besides at a far distance
 a dark hill-range with high peaks
 splashed with an extravagance of grandeur
 impossible to ignore. 65

At the foot of the hills were settlements
 of isolated houses
 interspersed with luxuriant bushes
 or fountains mid well-laid lawns. 66

The leading ogresses soon took a turn,
 and Sita was led forward
 and she saw a lone gold-hued Simsupa
 with sheltering foliage. 67

And in the shadow of the Simsupa
 she saw ensconced a hutment
 with a narrow gallery in the front
 where reigned blissful quietude. 68

At some distance to the right she beheld
 a pillared stately Temple,
 a wondrous structure of compelling charm,
 a majestic dome in black. 69

The procession stopped, and Sita could see
 'twas the end of the journey:
 she was to exchange her Panchavati
 for this nook in Asoka! 70

From the brusque commands and grotesque gestures
 of her Rakshasi jailors,
 Sita could picture with some clarity
 the tribulations ahead. 71

So this was her Mithila, where she had
 spent her carefree childhood days;
 this her Ayodhya, City of Delight,
 where she had lived with Rama; 72

aye, this was the hill-top Chitrakuta
 with its magnificent views;
 this the untamed Dandaka wilderness
 with its elected retreats, 73

where with Rama and blameless Saumitri
 she had parcelled out her days
 and experienced a rare peace and joy
 at the feet of the Rishis. 74

And here was her dear Panchavati too,
 where for a marvellous span
 of indeterminate time they had won
 the Kingdom of Happiness! 75

And all, all, by a vicious twist of fate,
 had now catapulted her
 across wide stretches of land and ocean
 and cast her here in prison. 76

The little hut was Ashrama enough,
 and although a prisoner,
 from the words the sly titanesses dropped,
 she'd have ample elbow room. 77

The fair lawns and spaces circumscribing
 the hut — the pond and the stream
 near the huge Temple, the encircling trees,
 the deer, the swans, the peacocks — 78

Sita would be free to wander about
 in reasonable measure,
 relax under the gold-hued Simsupa,
 or speak to the deer and swans. 79

And one of the ogresses said sweetly:
 "You'll get all the choicest food,
 a miscellany of the richest drinks,
 and all the raiment you want, 80

Here at the hub of Asoka Vana
 all sorrow scuttles itself;
 if Paradisal airs blow anywhere,
 it's here, here in Asoka. 81

All wishes attain their fulfilment here,
 and you've only to name 'hem;
 this single life is yours to make or mar,
 be wise in the choice you make." 82

While Sita had nothing to say, her eyes
 were more eloquent than words,
 and the contingent of demonesses
 felt dismissed, and disappeared. 83

It was now evening crawling towards night,
 and an unearthly stillness,
 a peace that quite defied understanding
 seemed to settle down like dew. 84

Resisting her sense of desolation,
 Sita made a dreamy move,
 walked up to the nearby crystalline stream
 and offered *sandhya* prayers. 85

A divine calm descended upon her,
 the creeping terror withdrew,
 she could gather her native strength once more,
 she was wide awake within. 86

While the shadows of the night were closing
 upon Asoka, the first
 pins of light appeared in the firmament
 and all earth seemed bathed anew. 87

An ineffable consanguinity
 held her rooted to the place,
 she recalled the mystique of her Earth-born
 history in Mithila, 88

she felt tremor after tremor passing
 through her tender tempered limbs
 and the feel of universality
 coursed through her veins and pulse-beats. 89

Stars a million were shining in the sky,
 and the expanse of the Earth
 smiled in effortless communion with them;
 and as starlight came like rain, 90

the variegated physiognomy—
 pools, lawns, trees, birds in their nests,
 the shy deer in their safe lurking corners—
 had a spray of warmth and peace. 91

Sita too felt a surge of strength and hope,
 and the load of exhaustion
 seemed to slip and roll away, and she raised
 her visage in gratitude. 92

Slowly walking back to her prison-house
 Ashrama, she paused a while
 near the all-comprehending Simsupa
 and felt an affinity. 93

It had seemed gaunt and tall from a distance
as if communicating
with the heavens; but on closer quarters,
it was fulsome and friendly. 94

The foliage was bushy and colourful,
some of the branches were low;
and Sita saw she could reach and feel them,
and hold on to them standing. 95

For a minute she stood still, lost in thought;
could this Tree be verily
the nexus between the infinities—
the Real and the Seeming? 96

Come to think of it, was it possible
she could be separated
from Rama?—he was no isolable
or limited personage! 97

Had she not always—awake or asleep—
seen him, heard him, inhaled him?
Did she not know that, torn apart from him,
she had no identity? 98

And how could great Rama himself sustain
his mystic redeemer role
when divorced from the soul of his being,
the immaculate Sita? 99

While this was doubtless the transcendent Truth
('Myself, myself, am Rama!'),
the *sruti* of the music of the worlds,
the Law governing all laws: 100

Sita couldn't ignore the phenomenal
and crass actuality—
ah she had left behind in Dandaka
both Rama and Lakshmana. 101

Maithili felt precariously poised
on the current edge of Time
between the rivalling eternities,
and she too swayed to and fro. 102

It was with infinite hope she had left
her sphere of Peace in response
to the human cry, and taken the plunge
into manifestation. 103

She had thought this solid and substantial
 Earth, this exciting glory
 of land masses mid the heaving waters
 of the encompassing seas— 104

she had dreamt that this captivating Earth
 would receive the afflatus,
 enact the intended efflorescence
 and achieve the desired change. 105

Perhaps the Simsupa with its unseen
 peaks above, its unseen roots
 reaching down to the deepest depths below,
 its branches Earth-embracing: 106

the Simsupa, like the Aswatha Tree
 of mythic antiquity,
 might help her forge the links between Heaven
 and Earth, the past and future. 107

There was a sudden breakthrough in her mind,
 for it was as though she had
 crossed a crucial consciousness-barrier,
 and the way ahead was clear. 108

As if awake with a new percipience,
 she now took a few firm steps
 towards the yonder prison-Ashrama,
 and thought of Rama again. 109

Canto 36: Sita's Introspection

For the next few days, life for Maithili
became a soulless routine,
a gradual acclimatisation
to her strange new surroundings. 110

The dozen demonesses came and went
with a mysterious air
three or four times a day, and enacted
an exasperating role. 111

As if, indeed, parodying themselves,
they sang Ravana's praises,
doled out the same mixture of inducements,
threats and sly exhortations. 112

And when they found that their words made no dent
on Sita's sublime resolve —
she needed nothing, would accept nothing,
and would make no concessions! — 113

the ogresses would make their departure
with mounting discomfiture,
sometimes in plain disbelief, and sometimes
hurling threats and abuses. 114

For Maithili, in her captivity,
the days were a stand-still hell,
and all Asoka's spendthrift seductions
failed to mitigate her pain. 115

As day followed dreary day, and Sita
refused all offers of food,
the ogresses speculated about
the source of her sustenance. 116

And Sita herself hardly knew at first
how long she could continue
her refusal of food, actuated
by her native revulsion. 117

In her extremity of misery
she could think neither of food
nor ease, neither of raiment nor comfort,
and a 'No' seemed natural. 118

But the hours gathered into days and nights,
 and day followed vacant day,
 and her body functioned just as before;
 she felt no weakness at all. 119

Asoka was full of trees yielding fruit
 in all seasons, and offered
 their best — plantain, mango, orange — as she
 wandered among them freely. 120

'Twas as though the generous Earth-mother
 was displaying her largesse
 and insinuatingly inviting her
 daughter to partake of it! 121

But there was indeed no hunger as yet,
 no call for food of any
 kind, and she could sustain her life drawing
 upon the hidden reserves. 122

She had heard some of the great Rishis claim
 immunity from decay
 of the body during their prolonged spells
 of fasting and privation. 123

"It's a question of one's being able
 to call upon the Shakti
 of the Universe," a Rishi had said;
 and clearly he spoke the truth. 124

The human body, a complex workshop
 engineered by the Spirit,
 had some alchemic potentialities
 beyond mental reckoning. 125

Besides, now it came with a lightning flash
 to her — how the Mahatma,
 her Raghava, had prepared her wisely
 before they entered the woods. 126

Rama had himself received instruction
 from Rishi Visvamitra
 on the eve of the momentous struggle
 with demoness Tataka. 127

"Rama," the Rishi had said, "take water
 in your hands, and learn from me
 'Bala' and 'Ati-bala', twin mystiques
 that defy hunger and thirst." 128

The acquisition of these secrets meant
a tremendous accession
of strength and invulnerability,
a star-badge of endurance. 129

When the time came for the three to vacate
Chitrakuta and make for
the dark unknown of Dandakaranya
with its dire uncertainties, 130

Rama had initiated Maithili
and Saumitri in 'Bala'
and 'Aṭi-bala', and so prepared them
for the worst of forest life. 131

It was, then, the high spiritual charge
she had received from Rama
on the banks of Mandakini that held
the clue to her endurance. 132

The mystiques had become integrated
with her everyday living,
and she needn't, today or at any time,
accept the Rakshasa's food. 133

She was Sita, after all, the Earth-born,
she was one with the Mother,
and manifold the life-currents that flowed
between her and the Mother. 134

Watching from under the Simsupa tree
the night's darkness melt and flow
and the Dawn usher in another day
with its explosion of Light, 135

Sita wondered morning after morning
when her own heavy darkness,
the division from Rama, would likewise
give place to another Dawn. 136

The decade in Dandaka had raced fast
as they shifted residence
from Ashrama to Ashrama, making
a round of the whole region. 137

Their life in Panchavati, an idyl
incomparable, had been
brutally cut short by malignant fate,
and her own folly and fright. 138

Since leaving Ayodhya, thirteen long years
 had passed like so many days,
 but these last few days were a sordid sum
 of terror and misery. 139

Sometimes she sat on the bare floor facing
 the maternal Simsupa;
 or stood under, wistfully holding on
 to one of its low branches. 140

But she wasn't awake, nor was she asleep;
 in a life that was neither
 waking nor sleeping, what dreams and nightmares?
 what incredible visions? 141

Wasn't she in Rama's presence all the time?
 didn't she breathe his ambience
 everywhere, and hence in Asoka too?
 And yet, at her touch, he fled! 142

He was there with her still, — and he wasn't there;
 she felt forlorn, abandoned;
 she seemed overpowered by a total
 black-out of consciousness-light. 143

She had no need of food or rest, and her
 inner climate of freshness
 and her regular *sandhya* orisons
 sustained her daily routine. 144

She would sometimes re-enact the events
 of that morning which swept on
 like a chain-compulsion till serpent-like
 Ravana swooped upon her. 145

The folly of succumbing to seeming,
 the giddy pleasure of gold,
 the desire for a phoney golden deer
 against Saumitri's warning; 146

and the worse folly of rejecting Grace, —
 for wasn't Saumitri the Grace
 that had cast on her the cloak of safety
 when her Rama was away? 147

How pointed was wise Ahalya's advice!
 Like Vipula for Ruchi,
 Saumitri would have been for her a shield
 against Ravana's assault. 148

Fool, fool, a child in her preferences,
and wilful and insistent,
and so perverse and impulsive in her
suspicions and reactions! 149

Why do people, with their fine upbringing
and deposits of culture
and all the disciplining of their minds,
succumb to fits of folly! 150

The spiral of consciousness was a climb
from the darkest inconscience,
past the plateaus and hillsides of ascent
to superconscient summits. 151

But what's this spasmodic oscillation
between the heights and the depths,
the pull of cussedness that drags one down
to the depths of misery? 152

'Twas common enough, it seemed, to grovel
in grooves of unease and want
or live among prisoners of frailty,
the unredeemed of the earth. 153

'Twas known, too, that the emancipated,
the realised ones, could reach
the peaks of felicity and dissolve
in their transcendence of ills. 154

But men and women must needs inhabit
the spiralling middle world,
and the ascent must mean integration
at every mediate step. 155

'Twas not the flight from Earth and the human
bondage that mattered, rather
the braving of the worldly and human
and their transfiguration. 156

The living Flame of the Jivanmukta,
the serene lucidity
of the Mind of Light, could have resisted
magic and deceit alike. 157

Her fostering in Mithila had done
much, then the education
in Dandaka's circuit of Ashramas
had seasoned her mind and heart. 158

Not enough! for she had erred grievously,
 and was now paying for it;
 this sundering and this suffering were
 her unfinished askesis! 159

Yes, for her frenzied folly that morning,
 here was her purgation, — but
 there, at the other end, Panchavati,
 how did the drama unfold? 160

Doubly deceived by that golden decoy,
 Maricha the Rakshasa,
 how did the stricken Brothers face the fact
 of the intrusion and theft? 161

It could be that Rama blamed Saumitri
 for leaving her defenceless,
 and perhaps, in self-defence, Lakshmana
 repeated her cruel words! 162

An abysmal guilt and shame ran through her,
 and she shuddered at the thought
 of Saumitri's squirming before Rama,
 and both collapsing in tears. 163

Sita wondered if any eye-witness,
 like the dying Jatayu,
 told Rama of Ravana's transgression,
 theft and air-dash to Lanka. 164

Their agonised search should've fanned out more
 and more, and they must have seen
 the smashed car and the dead charioteer,
 and Jatayu in a heap. 165

Was the expiring King-Bird, the gallant
 Jatayu, conscious enough
 and fully articulate to report
 on the Rakshasa's outrage? 166

And did Rama meet the Vanara group
 on the hill-top, amongst whom
 she had dropped, unnoticed by Ravana,
 the bundle of her jewels? 167

It was all mere surmise and the gamble
 of vague possibilities,
 but the actuality was the scission,
 the intolerable pain. 168

Arriving at the dolorous dead-end
of her thought-lacerations,
she would retire to the interior
and be lost in the Real.

Canto 37: Trijata and Anala

Time and time enough after her coming,
and the surface transactions
of her life, with their mechanical run,
belied the anguish within. 170

The titanesses came and went making
the customary motions,
and were met by Sita's studied silence
of contempt and dismissal. 171

They hymned Ravana's praises, exhorted
Sita to become his Queen,
spoke foully of Rama, and warned the worst
if she denied compliance. 172

But one stood apart, a late addition,
who seemed kindly and humane,
and a rapport fed by intimations
grew between her and Sita. 173

One afternoon this wardress came alone,
and Sita was both surprised
and happy; and now ensued a friendly
seminal conversation. 174

"I'm Trijata," she introduced herself
with a touch of nervousness;
"be not afraid, O virtuous Sita,
for you have friends in Lanka. 175

Vibhishana my father is the King's
younger brother; my mother,
Sarama, and my sister, Anala,
are all for the verities. 176

My father's position in Ravana's
Court is something delicate,
aye, like that of the soft sensitive tongue
surrounded by the sharp teeth. 177

He has somehow persuaded Ravana
that I might be asked to join
the wardresses, and keep an eye on them—
also be in touch with you. 178

We too belong to the Rakshasa race,
yet by choice and discipline
we're votaries of Dharma, committed
to the steep and narrow path. 179

Worthy Sita! long-suffering Sister!
since Ravana brought you here,
an unrest has been brewing in Lanka,
and questions are being asked. 180

The King's Council is summoned tomorrow,
and the whole issue will be
debated, and perhaps some will speak up,
and Ravana may listen. 181

I have arranged with my elder sister,
Anala, that she should come
in the evening and report to us here
the drift of the proceedings." 182

Sita heard all with mounting interest,
and indeed Trijata seemed
a high-souled and dependable person,
and a clairvoyant besides. 183

Her eyes had a visionary's brightness,
a vast mother-love brooded
over her gaunt protective limbs, and she
exuded infinite trust. 184

For Sita, this was a rare break from her
silence of isolation,
and 'twas truly refreshing to converse
with such a sister-spirit. 185

Trijata had much to say of Lanka,
its opulence and splendour,
of Ravana's might and magnificence,
his vanity and conceit. 186

She learnt too of Ravana's gynaeceum,
of Mandodari his Queen
who was both beautiful and virtuous,
and mother of Indrajit; 187

of Sulochana the Naga princess,
fair-minded and great-hearted,
worthy Indrajit's well-beloved wife,
as noble as she was wise; 188

- of Kumbhakarna the giant sleeper,
 Ravana's younger brother;
 a titan cast on a heroic mould,
 a *tamasic* colossus. 189
- "It's like this," said Trijata dolefully;
 "few dare to cross Ravana,
 for he's brave as well as intolerant,
 and brooks no opposition. 190
- His sustained tapasaya of long past years
 renders him immune to death
 at the hands of Devas or Asuras—
 and he has contempt for Man! 191
- But now that he has wickedly injured
 the invincible Rama—
 who is neither Deva nor Asura—
 great Lanka's King is afraid. 192
- If Ravana has seized and brought you here,
 blame his lust, but equally
 his desperate hope that, parted from you,
 grief-stricken Rama will die. 193
- But holy Sita! I feel in my soul
 that you two are born mainly
 to ordain a new order in Lanka
 o'er the debris of these times. 194
- Your seizure and suffering are the means
 by which the elemental
 issue between the Evil and the Good
 is being fatefully joined. 195
- In my fevered but radiant moments
 of perception, I often
 seem to see more than the mere naked eye—
 O fear not, Sita, you'll win." 196
- Trijata spoke with such sincerity
 and power of conviction
 that Sita felt she was really involved
 in the dynamics of change. 197
- There were indeed more things being fashioned
 in the mystic womb of Time
 than mortal beings, however intent,
 could figure out correctly. 198

Perhaps, as the percipient Trijata
had hinted, there were forces
quite beyond the private grief of Sita
or Rama's deprivation. 199

She could herself obscurely feel at times
the pressure of a cosmic
purpose, the surge of a mighty music,
involving all future Time. 200

When Trijata had taken leave, Sita
went into her deeper self,
and defying the current negations
sought the key to transcendence. 201

Late next evening, Trijata came again
with her sister Anala;
she had a committed look, and both paid
obeisance to Maithili. 202

Then seated before her, Anala said:
"Devi Sita, forgive us—
we're ashamed of Lanka, of Ravana,
and of the King's counsellors. 203

Many attended the Council meeting:
ministers and advisors;
elders and generals; and the stalwarts
of the Royal family. 204

Even Uncle Kumbhakarna was there
hauled up from his deep slumber;
and gallant Indrajit, Ravana's son;
and our hapless Father too. 205

In his attempt to sidetrack the issue,
Ravana spoke of honour
and security: he dwelt at some length
on Surpanakha's dudgeon, 206

Rama's annihilation of Khara's
fourteen-thousand strong army,
the loss of prestige in Janasthana
and all Dandakaranya. 207

It was imperative to teach Rama
a devastating lesson:
that was why Ravana had seized Sita
as a proper prize of war! 208

If within a year she gave her assent
 she would become Lanka's Queen;
 if she denied him still, no more mercy
 but the swiftest punishment! 209

There was hushed silence in the Council Hall
 till my Father rose to say:
 'O King! if Rama routed our army
 all alone, he's more than Man. 210

A superhuman power hems him round,
 for his uncanny arrows
 have destroyed some of our best warriors,
 and the whole army as well. 211

Lanka's King! as befits a great nation
 we should react maturely,
 face Rama in battle, meet force by force,
 and drive home our advantage. 212

Surpanakha did wrong soliciting
 Rama first, then Lakshmana,
 and assaulting Sita, thus provoking
 the rebuff and punishment. 213

She then goaded Khara to march against
 Rama, and in self-defence
 he wrought all that havoc: let's not hasten
 to condemn that anchorite. 214

But the capture of Sita, the flame-pure
 daughter of King Janaka,
 and her imprisonment in Asoka
 fill me with grave forebodings. 215

The verities of Dharma are assailed,
 the wrath of the injured Prince
 might soon explode as cataclysmal fire
 and burn down Lanka's Towers. 216

O Lord of Righteousness! retrace your steps
 in time, return Maithili
 to her Lord: and if you still must, fight him
 openly and chastise him.' 217

The words had a chilling and numbing
 effect on the councillors,
 and even Ravana, although his eyes
 rolled in anger, held his peace. 218

- The minutes crawled, and now rose Avindhya
 an elder statesman, prudent,
 possessed of admirable qualities
 and held high by Ravana. 219
- In his turn, Avindhya gave the warning
 that, were Sita not returned,
 Rama would invade and destroy Lanka
 and end the Rakshasa race. 220
- Kumbhakarna was silent, Indrajit,
 Prahasta, Virupaksha,
 princes, ministers, generals, all, all,
 seemed petrified and speechless. 221
- Suddenly Ravana's red eyes flashed fire,
 he stamped his foot, his voice shook,
 he was like one convulsed, obsessed and doomed:
 'No surrender of Sita! 222
- I've vowed she shall be my Queen — or my meal!
 Come Rama, come Lakshmana,
 come all the swarms of men from the whole world,
 I'll single-handed slay them!' 223
- After this burst of megalomania,
 Ravana fumed and stormed out,
 while the Council broke up with a feeling
 of graveyard fatality. 224
- I'm afraid, O Sita, that Ravana
 may resort to more ruthless
 courses to bend your will; yet cast off fear,
 for you're inviolable. 225
- However mad or maddened, he will not
 take the last forbidden step,
 for he lies under a curse, and he knows
 that moment will be his last. 226
- It's going to be a time of trial
 and excruciating distress,
 O Sita, but I have some good news too,
 and I speak from sure knowledge. 227
- Moving freely in the King's gynaeceum
 I meet his many consorts,
 but Mandodari is a paragon
 among women, chaste and fair. 228

Many of the consorts have youth and charm;
 some had come of their own will
 and infatuation, and some had been seized
 after an orgy of war. 229

Some had been hauled against their will, and some
 are of low degree, but none
 is without bearing, talent or sweetness;
 and Mandodari is Queen. 230

There's universal sympathy for you,
 O Sita; and the consorts,
 while they may be loyal to Ravana,
 melt with sympathy for you. 231

An awed admiration for you courses
 through their veins, they feel the surge
 of strong emotions when they think about
 your current tribulations. 232

And depend on honoured Mandodari,
 she'll not let Ravana stray
 beyond the last barrier but avert
 his canter to the abyss. 233

Remember, again, there's Sulochana
 counterpointing Indrajit
 her peerless husband, with her commitment
 to the path of righteousness." 234

After a minute of studied silence
 Sita said: "I find it strange
 that all except two of the councillors
 sought their safety in silence. 235

The same warriors who will risk their lives
 in battle—kill or get killed—
 quake nevertheless before a tyrant,
 and opt for shamed acquiescence. 236

But Anala, Trijata: I'm grateful
 to the Vibhishana clan;
 there's this trembling light in Lanka's darkness,
 and Grace will fusion with Light. 237

As for me, I don't know if I'm twyfold
 in my manifestation:
 the Sita that suffers, cries and despairs,
 and the mute Witness Sita. 238

It seems to me as easy to feel crushed
by the pressure of events
as to stand apart like the uninvolved
watching the transient play!" 239

After their departure, Sita withdrew
into her innermost self,
and beyonding the fret of the moment
she sought the stillness within. 240

Canto 38: The Ugly and the Beautiful

Straight from the Council Chamber Ravana
went to his Carousal Hall
and drowned his frustration and resentment
in blended intoxicants. 241

The fair charmers of the Hall crowded round
the tipsy Rakshasa King
and helped him taste sundry special dishes
and liquor tapped from flowers. 242

He felt happy looking at the jars, jugs,
pitchers, wine cups, variedly
made of gold, silver, crystal, or begemmed
and alluring to the eyes. 243

In this mood of bloated complacency,
he reaffirmed as he thought
the consensus the Council had distilled
and felt buoyed up as he cried: 244

“Sita must yield with no further delay!
Persuasion or pressuring,
fascination or fear, she must succumb—
I’ll cajoie or compel her! 245

I’ll depute some of the Museum monsters
to augment the prison guard:
they’ll by turns amuse and terrify her,
and her resistance will end. 246

But those talkative chicken-hearted fools,
Avindhya, Vibhishana:
they’re the black sheep of the Rakshasa race,
contempt is all they deserve!” 247

The days passed with no change in the climate,
the daily rhythm preserved
its customary minor deviations,
and peace reigned in Asoka. 248

Sita too moved about the garden space
but never beyond the range
of a fair circle round the Simsupa,
yet avoiding the Temple. 249

Of what use was the reckoning she kept
 of the hours, days, weeks or months:
 the days were bright but all was dark within;
 always 'twas the midnight hour! 250

The occasional talks with Trijata
 were a blessing, Anala
 brought news of the Palace and Gynaecium
 and regaled with anecdotes. 251

Of Rama and Lakshmana, however,
 nothing was known, yet Rama
 was growing into a god, a menace,
 a mystery and a doom! 252

Anala said Ravana's couriers
 were running between Lanka
 and Dandaka, and there was a flurry
 of anxiety in the Court. 253

In Ravana's gynaecium, the consorts
 and the lesser companions
 filled their lazy hours in speculation
 about Sita's sufferings 254

And Sarama from time to time sent word
 that the longest night must end,
 that the Sun never tarried, and Sita
 should await the coming Dawn. 255

Then one morning Sita was scandalised
 when a scowling and screaming
 contingent of misshapen Rakshasis
 swaggered and steered towards her. 256

"Ah this is one of the ruthless measures
 Anala had warned about,"
 thought Sita, and sat contained, immobile,
 like a rock facing a flood. 257

The howling and screaming rose to a pitch
 as the noisy heaving neared;
 and Sita, poised on her prepotent calm,
 studied the constituents. 258

"What a museum of monstrosities,"
 she sighed from her soul's great depths;
 "what teeming variety in ugliness,
 horror and misproportion!" 259

The one-eyed, the one-eared; the Rakshasi
 big-bodied but without ears;
 the ogress with her nose screwed on her head;
 the creature with hanging lips; 260

the demoness with a wild hang-dog face,
 and knocking angular knees;
 the shortish stoutish one, the hunchbacked one,
 the one with the twisted face; 261

the one with the swaying belly and breasts;
 the obese and rotund one;
 the yellow-eyed one, the repulsive one,
 the utterly frightful one! 262

Nay more: some had looks recalling tiger,
 goat, wild-boar, fox, buffalo;
 some had legs resembling an elephant's,
 a horse's, or a camel's; 263

some had uncouth and unwieldy bodies,
 some had terrifying teeth,
 some had heads nearly sunk in their bodies,
 and some had pendulous heads! 264

They made frantic efforts to frighten her,
 yet only roused her pity;
 Sita felt taken aback and shaken
 at first, and was then amused! 265

But the deeper feeling was compassion,
 the pained elemental cry
 of a hapless mother's fluttering heart
 and her sense of helplessness. 266

Sita was also stung to the marrow
 when, looking through the seeming,
 she deciphered psychic malformations
 reflecting the physical. 267

The two — the physically handicapped,
 the mentally retarded —
 seemed to be complementary phantoms,
 yet one in their misery. 268

The foul abuses and imprecations
 that freely alternated
 with the blandishments and exhortations
 hardly ruffled Sita's poise. 269

Even so the wearisome days dragged on,
 and Sita wore her heart out
 thinking of the continuing impasse
 and want of news of Rama. 280

There was little she could do, circumscribed
 as she was in Asoka
 under the benevolent Simsupa;
 only look for inner strength! 281

Often the evenings under the tree seemed
 dully, intolerably,
 long and oppressive, and Sita would then
 stray into introspection. 282

Yet in her terrible predicament, —
 a wife and a princess torn
 from her beloved Lord, and cast among
 alien titanesses: 283

a votary of holiness in love
 now perilously exposed
 to the treacherous solicitations
 of Ravana the lecher, — 284

she retained in the interior spaces
 of her soul's infinitudes
 a crystalline lucidity, a strength
 steely, and sheerly sublime. 285

She was assigned to Asoka, the Grove
 inimical to sorrow;
 and was that the reason her bruised heart
 would not countenance despair? 286

The corrosive feel of imprisonment,
 the ugly titanesses
 and their venomous jeers, the remembered
 grimaces of Lanka's King: 287

they assailed her without intermission,
 she shivered and wept, she lost
 the flair or will to fight on and survive,
 she was dead already, dead! 288

But this too wasn't the full arc of the Truth,
 for Truth had coils within coils,
 and at the centre of the labyrinth,
 the still point, aye, what was she? 289

In the confusing and stupefying
 existential thoroughfares,
 the one refrain was defeat, and the sole
 truth was the pain in her heart. 290

But like the ground *sruti* of all music,
 the etheric sustaining
 essence of everything seen or unseen,
 like Agni the life of all: 291

Sita had her own inner sovereignty,
 an ineffable secret
 of serene detachment and transcendence
 of forms, functions, fulfilments. 292

In the profound clarity of her soul
 that saw past, present, future
 all at once, and with neither excitement
 nor self-debasing regrets: 293

Sita lived again her intimacies
 with Rama, her other self,
 the plunges from the shores of innocence
 into existential seas. 294

But for all the nearness and privacy,
 the psychic tension and climb
 of ardour, the thrilled peaks of exhaustion
 had been few and far between: 295

a concession to the necessity
 of the human adventure,
 not a fever of the body or mind,
 nor an obsessive habit, 296

She remembered how, before they commenced
 their *sadhana* in exile,
 she had given her Lord the assurance
 she would not add to his cares. 297

And indeed they had lived for thirteen years,
 more as sister and brother
 than as wife and husband, and they had known
 nor passion nor satiety. 298

The vicissitudes of everyday life,
 the dull and grey and gorgeous
 and gloried moments, all alike had worn
 the same luminous halo. 299

Life and love and worship and askesis
 defied differentiation,
 and all existence was a flowering,
 an offering, a *siddhi*. 300

It was with her crystalline purity
 of vision Sita saw Love
 surpassing space and time, the physical
 and vital and cerebral. 301

In a quick exchange of lightning-flashes
 Sita saw a summary
 of the key-scenes of her life with Rama:
 the destined meeting of eyes, 302

the breaking of the Bow and the Wedding,
 the dawn-hour of wedded love,
 the bliss of shared exile that could defy
 Dandakaranya's trials, 303

and then that venomous crow, Indra's son, —
 like the father, the son too! —
 picking on her privacy with her Lord
 and foully outraging her! 304

How the crow had grovelled before Rama!
 and her Lord *would* spare its life,
 for his love, his love divine, stretched its arms
 to embrace all creation. 305

Now shot back the unforgettable day
 when a cloud of unknowing,
 the deceptive lure of spangled heavens,
 dimmed her vision for a while. 306

Maricha and Ravana had deployed
 the ugly double deceit
 of magic and sanctimonious pretence,
 and her paradise had crashed! 307

And although the bestial Rakshasa
 had held her in his fell grip,
 wasn't she seraphically beyond taint,
 and 'twas *her* fire that burnt him? 308

After that brief season of unwisdom,
 the calm of the Infinite,
 the omnicompetence of her true Self,
 had expunged the mists and rusts. 309

She was now simultaneously Sita
 the outraged innocent wife
and the spouse of the eternal Rama
 in their two-in-one blisshood. 310

Nothing was there now for lacerations,
 tears or recriminations,
and Sita felt serenely poised, and let
 the passing clouds have their day. 311

Having thus come to terms with her present
 predicament, Sita knew
herself quintessentially immune from
 Ravana's machinations. 312

This was an interim for loneliness,
 and nude self-sufficiency;
this too was a part of her askesis,
 and she watched, and she waited. 313

Canto 39: Ruminations and Lacerations

- And she was also more and more intrigued
by the eerie proceedings
in the Temple yonder, the Rakshasa
Congregational Mansion. 314
- While Sita conscientiously kept aloof
from the fenced-off premises,
she was aware of the periodic
convergings and dispersals. 315
- From her Simsupa vantage spot she could
see the grimly uniformed
Temple Guards going on their rounds like ghosts
trailing silence behind them. 316
- Sometimes there was a rush of devotees
with their mysterious loads
of burnt offerings, and the midnight hour
would then explode into light. 317
- Who were the divinities they worshipped?
Who were the privileged priests?
What awful profanities of prayer?
What ecstatic self-givings? 318
- Sita was lost in the disturbing thought
that anything, anything,
the highest, holiest, carried within
the seeds of its perversion. 319
- She recalled Anala's long recital
of Ravana's ascetic
self-denials, and his proficiency
in the chanting of the Riks, 320
- of his stern warrior-code and kingcraft,
of his hoary ancestry,
of his victory over Kubera
and the conquest of Lanka. 321
- To what end, however, all that glory,
all that epic *tapasya*?
He had only smothered the sanctities
and bartered his soul away. 322

Sita mused with agonising deep breaths
 whether the frail blade of grass
 wasn't happier far than the aggressive
 tall oak attracting thunder! 323

Oft amid the oppressive silences
 of a dismal afternoon,
 she let rumination wander afar
 from Here to Infinity. 324

Hadn't she come down to this unfinished Earth
 coercing her transcendence
 and cabinning it within the schedules
 of a space-time Mandala? 325

She had descended because Janaka's
 unselfish incandescent
 askesis for the racial well-being
 had compelled her acquiescence. 326

'Twas her self-obtained role as transforming
 spirit — as the great Earth-born
 symbol of life, love, strength of sufferance —
 to initiate the new times. 327

But the earth's inhabitants seemed to have
 their own strange perversities
 of choice, priority and indulgence,
 and orgies of self-defeat. 328

Life, more life, when in league with love, more love,
 flowered as Power and Grace
 and ripened as rich fruit for the soulful
 service of the Mandala. 329

But that was not how the sons of *preyas* —
 persons with insatiable
 hungers, the kinetic Asuric ones —
 viewed the theatre of life. 330

She had sprung like a splendour of lighting
 and revealed to Janaka
 how the Earth was universal Mother,
 life-giver and sustainer. 331

But o'er the millennia the humans,
 slaves of curiosity
 and impatience, had made probes and soundings
 and brandished strange instruments: 332

art, artifice—cunning and contrivance—
 shamming Nature and going
 one better (or worse)—ceaseless subtlety—
 and callous desecration! 333

Wasn't it enough to be Son of Woman,
 grow in the *sreyas* within,
 strain after the gold-summits of Knowledge,
 and act the proximate god? 334

The son of Woman would be Son of Man,
 and Man would ape the Titan,
 the Asura, and would burden himself
 with *preyas* and surplusage. 335

Restless rapacious Man would wrest the truths,
 the interior secrets,
 that held together the mysterious
 and symphonic universe; 336

and fouling sacreligious peeping imps
 for whom nothing was sacred
 but only an occasion for giggle
 and a permissive charter, 337

sundry unscrupulous Knights of Darkness,
 clever with their razor-sharp
 intelligence, amoral, inhuman,
 ready for the soul's deep swoon, 338

would turn days to grim artificial nights,
 make hell a sanctuary,
 meddle with great Prakriti's primordial
 cycles of world subsistence; 339

self-blinded Man was thus ready to lose
 in sly deceptive stages
 his innate endowments and sovereignties
 and grow estranged from himself. 340

Abandoning his pioneering role
 in the evolving helix,
 Man had moved to the sidelines and become
 bird or beast or leviathan; 341

or fabricated lethal tooth and claw,
 or concocted reptile's spue;
 or lightning and thunder in mushroom clouds,
 and death in myriad forms. 342

- Prakriti the Mother Goddess might feel
her true occupation gone,
for her perverted children seemed hell-bent
on a total ruination! 343
- As more and more she spoke to Anala
with her Court associations
or the sage and serious Trijata
with her psychic transmissions, 344
- Maithili grew wise and sad and pensive,
felt an excruciating pain
that the virus of corruption should taint
some of the finest and best. 345
- She remembered the aristocratic
Kaikeyi, her pride, her charm
of manners, her undimished beauty,
her regal unselfishness: 346
- yet that Manthara with her mildewed ears,
her venomous serpent-eyes,
sleazy insinuating tongue, could drag
her mistress down to the depths. 347
- And Maithili turned the accusing light
on her own maddening fall
from Grace when, in Panchavati, she drove
loyal Saumitri away. 348
- Sometimes, when cerebation warmed her up
and her vision grew clouded,
Sita felt caught in the interstices
of a fateful self-made net. 349
- In that tantalising jigsaw puzzle
of teasing causality,
how should she separate the guilty one
*from the guilt or the victim? 350
- Time past and time present and time future,
the three-in-one mystery
unendingly prodded her consciousness
and sharpened her perceptions. 351
- There she was, still-centred in Asoka;
no straying away, nor change;
the same place day after day, like the earth
with the great Sun circling round; 352

and Sita in her native poise and peace,
 with Time grounded to a halt:
 and all these hours, days, weeks, months — how many? — 353
 whirling round Raghava too!

The Rishis oft used to talk of the wheel
 with its invisible hub
 and the constantly revolving felly;
 yet the wheel was whole and one. 354

Maithili in her contained misery
 could easily imagine
 Rama's and Saumitri's mounting distress
 as they frantically searched, 355

or scoured all Dandakaranya, the hills,
 caves, the hermit-settlements,
 majestic Godavari's bathing ghats,
 and the old familiar haunts. 356

Hectic, agitated, now dejected,
 and anon hopeful again;
 the two royal exiles soon renewing
 their quest for the lost Sita: 357

she was here, and they were there wandering
 in the wildest Dandaka;
 and the dividing distance became nought,
 and the Truth defied the Lie. 358

The sundering from her lord, Kakutstha,
 the sense of isolation,
 was still somehow annulled by the mystic
 unassailable oneness. 359

How else could she have survived all these months
 though torn brutally apart —
 like fish from life-giving water — from her
 blessed and bountiful Lord? 360

She suffered intensely, but her body
 didn't wither, life didn't desert
 her, she had nor need nor desire to sleep,
 or seek food for nourishment. 361

With Ravana's behind-the-scenes presence
 and sly solicitations
 by proxy, with all that ceaseless barrage
 of pleading and threatening, 362

the alternations between the comics
 of the ugly ogrèsses
 and the blood-curdling terror-offensives
 of the ruthless wardresses, 363

wouldn't she have cracked under the steady strain
 and collapsed altogether
 were it not that somehow a deeper Law
 rendered her inviolate? 364

Night after night — and she had kept no count —
 and they were darker, longer;
 yet the dawn, however belated, had
 brought its brightness and solace. 365

That dear old nurse in Mithila, Kunti,
 had oft explained to Sita
 with a smiling yet stubborn persistence
 how change was the law of life: 366

the delayed dawn was still the dawn, the Sun
 dispelled the thick mists at last,
 the splendour of the rainbow was the end
 of the grim hours of the storm! 367

Kunti had taken her share of the shocks
 of earth-born adversity,
 the petty ironies of life, and yet
 preserved her humanity. 368

And she used to say: "Let the worst happen,
 my child, let the nether depths
 chill your being, but the Grace is around,
 the redemption is decreed!" 369

Sita mused with a new light in her eyes,
 for she felt her Rama too
 was then wearing his lone heart out somewhere
 hoping to meet her again. 370

How many times should she remind herself
 they two weren't parted at all?
 Wasn't it all a drama of destiny,
 the finis yet to be played! 371

Surely some cosmic fiat of complex
 predestination drove them,
 oft purblinded by their egotisms
 and trite misunderstandings. 372

Yet this continuous shadow-boxing,
 for all its alternating
 pressures of pain and pleasure, failed to reach
 the deeper ground of Being. 373

It was good, thought Maithili, that she had
 these tonic intimations
 of the unbroken unassailable
 identity with Rama. 374

She remembered how, when Anala came
 last week with sage Trijata,
 she had conveyed the ominous loose talk
 current in the gynaeceum: 375

Ravana was reported to have said:
 "My patience is at an end,
 and it's time to force myself on Sita
 and compel her acquiescence." 376

A creeping shudder convulsed her once more,
 and Maithili thought it strange
 that several months should have passed her by,
 so quickly as now it seemed! 377

She knew her Raghava would come, she knew
 nothing could ever touch her;
 yet Anala's report was a portent,
 and Sita was tense in thought. 378

And once more she recalled how ironies
 and her own follies had schemed
 and landed her in the grim situation
 of defence against the Dark: 379

"What's the name and nature of chastity?
 and what are its intrinsic
 powers and compulsions? A stranger lusts
 after me, and yet I live! 380

This lecherous Rakshasa has fouled me,
 cast his evil eyes on me,
 seized me deceitfully and brought me here,
 his fell hand on my body. 381

Ah why didn't I cease to breathe the moment
 this aggressive male monster
 ventured to view me with lustful intent
 and disgrace me with his touch? 382

The magic golden deer came as a bait,
 and I begged my Lord to go
 after it, and forced Saumitri, heaping
 insults on him, to follow. 383

Even thus in my knotted purblindness
 I destroyed my defences;
 and when the lust-inflamed anchorite came,
 I was there for his seizure. 384

Ten months are past, and I'm in Ravana's
 repellant custody still;
 I must be viler than these ogresses
 to have thus lived through my shame! 385

Why do I live? and what do I hope for?
 No doubt these rare sisters twain,
 the helpful Anala, the prophetess
 Trijata, ring me with love. 386

Yet how long, and how intolerable,
 this vigil of endless days
 and nights, this tasteless hoping against hope,
 this sheer silence of waiting? 387

And in this total black-out of knowledge—
 for I don't know if Rama
 knows yet where and by whom I'm held captive—
 what's life but the mask of death? 388

And suppose Rama knows or comes to know
 the sordid circumstances
 of my capture and brutal conveyance
 and imprisonment, what then? 389

He might come, and with his valorous bow
 and arrow kill Ravana
 and his Rakshasa hordes, liberate me
 'from these ogresses — and then? 390

Suppose he turned to me and said: 'You've lived
 in the Rakshasa's household
 for months, and I may not take you back, for
 you aren't above suspicion!' 391

Woe is me: why didn't I die, cease to be
 by sheer power of my will,
 when that poltroon-Rakshasa defiled me
 with his poisoned stare and touch? 392

But pause, pause a little, my tortured soul!

I'm not alone the deceived,
desecrated and abducted Sita —

I'm Woman, and all her woes! 393

Startling nightmarish visions invade me,

for I seem to see vistas,
vistas behind vistas, of women young,
and of women not so young: 394

what, will these images of womanhood,
the abused and bruised ones,
the gored and mutilated ones, the pure
but callously cast-out ones: 395

aye, the more sinned against than sinning ones,
the sheer angel-innocents
sold away to a worse than living death —
alas, the Earth-born daughters! 396

I see darkly as in a cloudy haze
but with a naked horror
the cursed perversity of the male
in his commerce with Woman. 397

From Anala I've heard chilling reports
of Ravana's adventures
with women — of waylaid virgins, the seized
wives of the males he had killed, 398

the doomed sisters, daughters, even mothers
mechanically bundled
and brought as the trophies of his conquest
in his gorgeous chariots! 399

Oh war, war, oh lechery, lechery:
the twin debasing hobbies
of the male that deaden and degrade him
and make him the Asura! 400

And in the coarsening brutalising
process, the wretched female
may succumb sometimes to the temptations
brewed and offered by the male. 401

The other day clairvoyant Trijata
went into a prolonged fit
and curdled my blood with her descriptions
of human obliquity. 402

When a villain casts his lecherous eye
 on a lone blameless woman,
 or in the might of his maleness assaults,
 mangles and abandons her, 403

must the injured woman take on the guilt
 of the culprit-male, and feel
 responsible for the crime and the shame,
 and seek her self-extinction? 404

'O Sita, Sita!' Trijata had cried
 in an accession of pain;
 'I see the purest of the pure, bravest
 of the brave, and the fairest; 405

I see them, the shining angel-faces,
 in total resignation
 or despair, mechanically leaping
 into the ravenous fire; 406

and a hundred other highways, trap-doors,
 sly ingenious devices,
 poisons, potions, all, all encompassing
 earth-daughters' untimely deaths!' 407

What justice is this, this vast distortion
 of the basic moral code
 that orders the killing of the victim
 and reprieves the guilty ones? 408

When the soul is seraphically free
 and the mind is its armour
 impregnable, the male can only grasp
 the mere corpse of his desire. 409

No, no, I'll not for all my helplessness
 opt for the ready escape,
 but dare, dare, the devilish Ravana
 till he's finally destroyed." 410

Canto 40: Ravana and Sita

- And another day wearily dragged on
with the same futile schedule
of non-events and irrelevances
and routine profanities: 411
- the sly demonesses in the background
vaguely watching all the time
and confabulating among themselves
and swearing indecencies, 412
- and now and then executing an act:
singing Ravana's praises,
wooing her on his behalf, or warning
her of fell consequences. 413
- But by nightfall an eerie silence reigned
and Sita sat immobile
amid the gathered darkness, and bird-cries
came like the solace of speech. 414
- It was once more the bleak hour of the night
when darkness seemed permanent
with no hope of Dawn or efflorescence
of Day and life's renewal: 415
- and Sita whose life in Asoka Grove
swayed between a numbed silence
and the high fever of cerebration
felt rather warmed up within, 416
- and yet once more she let loose the wild hounds
of her agitated mind
after surmises and apprehensions
and slick probabilities. 417
- The dreary hours in their one-way traffic
had vanished into the past,
and while memory was a shot-silk piece
of conflicting emotions, 418
- there was no retrieval of an event
nor of its safe annulment:
only post-mortem examinations
and the attendant fall-out. 419

Ten long months had passed, but why didn't Rama —
 the killer of Viradha
 and of Khara and his fourteen thousand! —
 rescue her from Ravana? 420

And with a stab of pain she recalled how
 the Asuric crow pecked at
 her breast spilling blood that woke up sleeping
 Rama, his head on her lap; 421

her agony stung him, and he released
 a Brahma-shaft which pursued
 the fleeing crow wherever he might go
 and nobody could help him, 422

till at last in desperation the bird
 fell at Rama's feet and sought
 his sovereign protection from the power
 of the infallible dart. 423

And Rama spared the crow's life, for the shaft
 hit the Asura's right eye
 and was satisfied; and his lesson learnt,
 the one-eyed crow disappeared. 424

Sita wondered how it was that her Lord
 who could thus destroy Khara
 or punish Kaka seemed nevertheless
 to let Ravana go free. 425

Perhaps Rama didn't know her whereabouts
 and was searching for her still,
 her run of ill-luck infecting him too
 with impotence and defeat; 426

and perhaps he had in sheer grief opted
 for vagrant mendicancy
 or a desert-solitary's non-life,
 a hermit's non-attachment; 427

or, torn from her and suffering the pangs
 of scission, her well-beloved
 Rama had shuffled off his mortal coil
 and departed for Heaven! 428

A worse thought — could it be that her Rama,
 schooled in Dharmic discipline,
 had chosen to grin and suffer it all,
 containing his emotions? 429

It could even be that by natural
 process, being out of sight,
 she had by and by moved out of his mind
 as well,—aye to oblivion! 430

Worse and worst, the viperous thought assailed
 her at unguarded moments:
 had Rama speeded back to Ayodhya
 looking for another wife? 431

Sure, thought Sita, the burden of her sins
 must be terrible indeed,
 and all her holiness of chastity
 seemed to be unavailing. 432

Why, Saumitri alone, with his brother's
 permission, could have destroyed
 the Rakshasa and achieved her release . . .
 but she had wronged him, alas! 433

And this above all: her adversary,
 the infernal Ravana,
 had he already liquidated both
 Raghava and Saumitri? 434

And so like a boiling cauldron of oil,
 like the tempestuous sea,
 Sita's mind seethed and heaved in a fever
 of raging uncertainty. 435

So disturbed was she within and so lost
 to her outer surroundings—
 the Asoka with its spread of sandal,
champak and *bakula* trees, 436

and the Simsupa full of foliage
 like a motherly embrace—
 Sita was hardly conscious of the stir
 of life in her neighbourhood: 437

sudden sweeps of wind and rustle of leaves,
 the shy deer's furtive movements,
 the bird's unpredictable twittering,
 the fall of a withered branch: 438

'twas all part of the physiology
 of loneliness in the dark,
 and in course of time Maithili had learnt
 to take them all for granted. 439

O'er the weary months she had grown inured,
 and she slept with intent eyes
 like a hermit self-absorbed in *tapas*
 awaiting the last breakthrough. 440

For Sita in her grim insulation,
 while ten months had flown quickly
 seen in retrospect, each current minute
 lingered like eternity. 441

The guard lay huddled at some fair remove
 overcome by the stupor
 of excess feeding and intoxicants —
 but Trijata slept apart. 442

Ah, wasn't it like a familiar painting
 by talented Urmila,
 the ensemble — background, people, foreground —
 unchanging day after day? 443

A prisoner of her rumination,
 Maithili sat impassive
 facing the hospitable Simsupa
 and the first streamers of Dawn. 444

And presently at the avenue's end
 she saw a brisk splash of light
 and heard the tread of advancing footsteps
 and the sound of anklet bells. 445

Something like an infallible sixth sense
 alerted her instantly,
 and she knew — as Anala had hinted
 'twas Ravana approaching. 446

The old torture to be re-enacted?
 the unseemly attentions,
 the sordid flatteries, inducements, threats,
 the whole rigmarole of lust! 447

And he was coming in royal purple,
 not as at Panchavati
 in an anchorite's saffron, but ringed round
 by his gynaeceum beauties: 448

some with chowries, some with palmyra fans,
 ministered to their Master,
 while some held torches to light up the way,
 and some carried cushioned chairs. 449

And some of Ravana's women, reeling
 under the night's hangover,
 shadowed him as he walked, like lightning streaks
 after a mountainous cloud. 450

Ordered in a hurry to follow him,
 those charmers of his harem,
 drawn to him by awe and fear, made music
 with their swinging girdle-bells. 451

And Ravana, bristling with impatience,
 loomed majestic as he strode,
 his mind a slave to his passions, his eyes
 looking out for Maithili. 452

Sita too, the flame-pure wife exiled from
 her native felicity,
 the lost Bride of peerless Rama, beheld
 the advancing Rakshasa. 453

She felt invaded and outraged, and like
 a lone plantain tree shaken
 by a fierce wind, Maithili rocked as if
 seized by terror and trembling. 454

There she sat, wasted by her sufferings,
 her hands covering her breasts,
 her thighs concealing her stomach, her face
 imaging desperation. 455

She was like a ship about to flounder,
 a fallen bough withering
 on the ground, a tender lotus creeper
 messed up by the clinging mud. 456

On the cold bare hard earth sat Maithili
 armoured by her askesis,
 yet like a mantra-held Naga princess
 she writhed in her helplessness. 457

There as she cowered in her veil of mist,
 she was like a gloried Name
 besmirched by slander, or Vedic lore lost
 through lack of cultivation; 458

yes, like the bright Rohini o'ershadowed
 by vengeful Dhumaketu;
 or like a highborn girl in the mean house
 of her unlettered husband; 459

like a great reputation deflated,
 or a pure faith spurned aside;
 or like learning reduced to pettiness,
 or a good impulse held back; 460

again, like a welcome order withdrawn,
 or a mansion in ruins;
 like a holy rite sharply arrested,
 or a light screened by darkness; 461

like the desolation that's the outcome
 of an elephant's rampage,
 the birds scattered by fright, the lotuses
 crushed, and the waters muddied! 462

Nay more: like an altar desecrated,
 a river without water,
 a fire extinguished, or the full moon night
 quite darkened by the eclipse. 463

Sorrow-stricken, her tresses untended,
 given to ceaseless brooding,
 unwashed, unadorned, unfed, unrested,
tapas was her sole credit. 464

And sorely tried by her tribulations,
 she seemed tranced in attention
 as if praying to God that her Rama
 might somehow end the Titan. 465

It was to this immaculate Sita
 of enchanting eye-lashes
 that Ravana made his appeal matching
 his words with expressive signs: 466

"O you fair in every limb, your round thighs
 are like an elephant's trunk;
 scared of me, you hide your breasts and belly
 resolved I should not see them. 467

Be not afraid, Sita, for neither man
 nor Rakshasa will harm you;
 'twas my right to seize you to quench my fire,
 yet Sita cast aside fear. 468

Let my desire burn as it will, I'll not
 so much as touch you, Sita,
 unless you give consent: abandon, then,
 this sullen stasis of woe. 469

O sweet to behold! there's none your equal
 in beauty in all the world;
 having first created you, didn't Brahma
 retire from his vocation? 470

O you woman of sweet smiles and fair teeth
 and wonderful eyes, O you
 of captivating hips, you've captured me,
 as Garuda grabs a snake! 471

O woman beautiful beyond compare!
 throw off these masks of sorrow,
 deck your limbs with choice silks and jewellery,
 garlands, scents and sandal-paste. 472

This springtime season of youth won't endure,
 like a flood that ebbs away:
 O beauty, whichever limb I behold
 I feel rivetted to it! 473

O bashful one! all the gems I've gathered
 from the worlds and brought hither,
 all are yours; this Lanka, aye, myself too,
 all, all shall be yours alone. 474

Trust me, requite my love, share my delights,
 and enslave me to your will:
 make Mithila's Lord bask in my sunlight,
 make free with my lands and wealth. 475

What can you do with b  rk-wearing Rama,
 the impecunious wastrel?
 He roams about, a man of penances;
 I doubt he's even alive! 476

I see you in a torn piece of raiment,
 you're sullen and off colour:
 yet, having seen you, I can find no joy
 with the best of my consorts. 477

O Janaki! my several spouses
 are the triple world's choicest;
 and all will readily serve you: assume
 sovereign over them all. 478

Myself and my realms I lay at your feet,
 and there's no more cause for fear;
 let's, then, sport in seaside arbours where bees
 buzz among the big trees' buds!" 479

Having heard Ravana, Sita felt pained
 and alarmed, and placed a blade
 of grass — a potent barrier — between
 the Rakshasa and herself. 480

Then, her tears and trepidations held back,
 she brought out a benign smile,
 and in apt words of persuasive power,
 returned a forthright answer: 481

“Call back your mind from me, O Ravana,
 and steer it where it belongs:
 the Queens and Consorts who have come with you
 in their love and devotion. 482

Remember I’m the righteous Rama’s wife,
 and it’s not for me to stray
 in the least from the hallowed Dharmic path
 of resolute chastity. 483

Your wives need protection, and so do I;
 but when, driven by your lust,
 you let your mind dwell upon me, this must
 soon spell out your destruction. 484

Are there no wise, bold and seasoned ones here
 to show you the knife-edged path?
 Or, your morals grown perverse, have you hushed
 them up in your purblindness? 485

When leonine Rama and Lakshmana
 were out for a little while,
 O you vile wretch, you came to the exposed
 cottage and laid hands on me. 486

Wasn’t it the total defeat of your arms
 in Dandaka that piqued you,
 O Rakshasa, and egged you on to this
 sinful cowardly action? 487

It cannot be that this fabled Lanka,
 the home of the Rakshasas,
 is doomed by your reprehensible rule
 to meet an untimely end. 488

Let me yet give you a piece of advice
 for the universal good:
 return me, Ravana, with no delay
 to Rama the best of men. 489

He's famed as the refuge of the helpless
 who make surrender to him :
 you too can renounce all desire of me
 and win my Raghava's Grace. 490

I warn you else that, just as a gaunt tree
 is felled by the thunderbolt,
 such will be thy defeat when the time comes
 and Rama's dart hurls you down." 491

Stung by the vehemence of Sita's speech,
 Ravana was wild with rage
 and lust, he swayed and shook, his lips trembled
 and he exploded his threats: 492

"The more one speaks pleasing words to women,
 the better the reception;
 but the more praises I pour before you,
 the sharper your reaction. 493

For every cruel word, O Maithili,
 now spoken by you to me,
 it would be the aptest justice to pass
 a sentence of death on you. 494

Reconsider your 'No', Devi, lest I —
 in my backlash of fury —
 attack Mithila and bring Janaka
 shamed and shackled before you. 495

But for this o'ermastering spell of love,
 I could decree instant death:
 yet, woman, I'll wait for the time-limit,
 of which two months more remain. 496

If you fail to come to me willingly
 within this sanctioned truce-time,
 my royal cooks will hack you to pieces
 and serve you for my breakfast." 497

In the chilling interim that followed,
 Ravana's train of consorts
 sent speechless messages to Janaki
 by movements of eyes and lips. 498

Thus feeling sustained by them, Sita faced
 Ravana once more, and spoke
 words of benevolence born of her pure
 nature and soul's radiance: 499

- "Is there none in all Lanka to save you
 from your fateful evil course?
 Know that, like the flame-pure Sachi, I too
 have immunity from harm. 500
- It's odd that you, a warrior engirt
 by armies, you, Kubera's
 brother, should have stolen me deploying
 necromancy and deceit. 501
- Coward! you seized me when I was alone,
 and Rama was nowhere near:
 'twas to predetermine your destruction
 that the gods let it happen. 502
- Don't you know that, were it not for Dharma's
 constraints and Rama's fair name,
 the fire of my chastity could reduce
 Lanka and you to ashes? 503
- Worst of sinners! I wonder how your tongue
 can speak vilely of Rama,
 and your blood-shot eyes foully gaze on me,
 yet fail to drop to the ground!" 504
- Listening to her scalding indictment,
 Ravana's tongue and eye blazed
 like leaping flames, his diadem trembled,
 his girdles and armlets shook. 505
- He was like the huge Mandara mountain
 snake-ringed for ocean-churning,
 and in his surge of anger his fierce mouth
 hissed prolonged bellow-like breaths. 506
- Affirming he would instantly kill her,
 the irate Rakshasa called
 the ugly and repulsive wardresses,
 the one-eyed, the big-bellied, 507
- the ones with cloaking ears or without ears,
 the noseless and tongueless ones,
 the huge-necked ones with Gargantuan breasts,
 aye, the dog-faced, the pig-faced, 508
- and ordered them to concerted action
 that would make Sita soften
 towards him; and for attaining this end
 all, all means would be valid: 509

“Launch an all-out offensive: try sweet speech
 or gifts; sow doubts; terrorise!
 but somehow bring her round to acceptance
 of my sovereignty and love.” 510

Then, in a sudden spurt of lust and rage,
 he lurched towards Maithili
 and made violent unseemly gestures
 as though he might assault her. 511

Like lightning now rushed to her side — taking
 her cue from Mandodari —
 the lithe glamorous Dhanyamalini,
 and held him passionately. 512

“Desist, O King!” she cried, “from squandering
 your love on this unworthy
 Sita of the listless human species;
 come, sport with me, be happy! 513

There’s only defeat in your love for one
 who cares not to requite it,
 but with me, O Lord, whose love isn’t withheld,
 there is bliss and fulfilment.” 514

Thus mollified by sweet speech, Ravana
 smiled complacently, and let
 himself be caressed and cuddled, and drawn
 away from Sita’s presence. 515

Canto 41 : Sita — From Darkness to Light

As Ravana and his colourful train
retreated from Asoka,
the pure angelic Sita felt relieved
though in perturbation still. 516

The several wardresses now became
vocal and plied Maithili,
as desired by Ravana, with friendly
counsel first, followed by threats. 517

One spoke of Ravana's great ancestry
going back to Pulastya,
another with her gaping cat-like eyes
praised the Heroic Hero. 518

Others peremptorily asked Sita
whether or not she would wed
Ravana, King of Kings, Lord of Battles,
Ruler of the Elements! 519

Her lotus eyes brimming with tears, Sita
gave the unruffled reply
that their advice was perverse and sinful,
unworthy of acceptance: 520

“Not for me, Sita of the human race,
to marry a Rakshasa;
you may hurl upon me your combined weight,
yet I'll neither bend nor break. 521

Although my husband may have lost his realm
and fallen on evil days,
like Surya's Suvarchala, I'm Rama's, —
his unseverable wife. 522

Sachi is never parted from her lord,
nor Rohini from Chandra;
nor is Arundhati from Vasistha,
Sukanya from Chyavana; 523

aye, not Lopamudra from Agastya,
Savitri from Satyavan;
neither is Srimati from Kapila,
Kesini from Sagara; 524

nor is Madayanti from Sowdasa,
 Damayanti from Nala!
 Like these chaste paragons, I too will swear
 by my true husband alone. 525

These names are the veritable scriptures
 of the faith of wedded wives,
 and their mantric potency can withstand
 the mightiest of tyrants." 526

Thus quite rebuffed by her faith and fealty,
 the menacing ogresses
 advanced in force and closed upon Sita
 and bit their pendulous lips. 527

Reacting in self-defence, Maithili
 wiped out the tears from her eyes
 and drew near the spreading Simsupa tree
 as if seeking safe refuge. 528

From all four sides the demonesses pressed
 upon the wide-eyed Sita
 and pursued their pressurising tactics
 and veiled intimidations. 529

Thus Vinata: "You've shown, Lady Sita,
 your deep love for your husband;
 but anything pursued beyond reason
 or season merits censure. 530

You've followed the lower human ethics
 thus far, but now is the time
 to rise to the higher code and accept
 the King of the Rakshasas." 531

Vikata, another ogress, added:
 "Witless woman, don't you see
 we speak only for your own benefit?
 Enough of these welling tears! 532

O timid one! don't you know woman's youth
 cannot endure for ever?
 Before the stuff of your youth is snuffed out,
 quaff betime! the cup of joy!" 533

After these two sly demonesses had
 spoken unavailingly,
 the fiercer ones now threatened to hack her
 to make a sumptuous feast. 534

Thus Chandodari and Ajamukhi,
 Pragāsa and the spiteful
 Surpanakha threatened to feed on her
 and dance at Nikumbilai. 535

Listening to the sadistic speeches
 of these revolting creatures,
 the pure feminine, the divine Sita,
 lost her fortitude and wept. 536

The fit of sobbing, the torrent of tears,
 the heave of the breasts, the lash
 of the time and terror, made her crumble
 like a storm-hit plantain grove. 537

A picture of desolation, her frame
 shaken by sobs, Maithili's
 long and heavy plait loomed dark like a snake
 swinging hither and thither. 538

While 'twas natural she should thus break down,
 there could be no betrayal,
 and she told the wardresses they were free
 to devour her if they wished. 539

Growing introspective, Sita marvelled
 at her life's tenacity,
 for with the cruelties she had suffered
 she should have died already. 540

Environed thus by the titanesses
 and menaced by Ravana,
 the holy Sita felt suffocated
 and saw no hope of succour. 541

And like a fawn abducted from its kind
 and tormented by the wolves,
 Sita in sheer fright shrank within herself
 and shook uncontrollably. 542

Irresolute she stood up and reached for
 a lower branch for support
 and felt like a frail ship tossed in mid-sea
 by raging cyclonic winds. 543

"What do I know of my sins of past lives?"
 Sita muttered in despair;
 "it's the wages of those sins that I must
 suffer my present travail." 544

Swaying thus between self-probing and tears,
 Sita knew no inner peace,
 and once more gave vent to ruminations,
 regrets and lacerations. 545

Had her heart hardened into diamond
 that, for all her sufferings,
 it refused to break or disintegrate
 and end her tribulations? 546

But however vain her ravings, she'd have
 no truck with the Rakshasa:
 indeed, he was free to get her split, cut,
 burnt, or roasted in the fire! 547

Burning sharp like a piece of hot iron,
 the old Mithilan nightmare
 returned, and she also called back to mind
 the meeting with Maitreyi. 548

While worldly-wise Katyayani had sprayed
 Sita with love and quickly
 revived her high spirits, Maitreyi had
 armed her to face her trials. 549

A Tapasvini, she had read the script
 of the future and subtly
 prepared the pure-souled Vaidehi for all
 the sore afflictions to come. 550

Maitreyi had hinted how the cosmos,
 ramshackle though it might seem
 howling out its disorder, was no fake
 but a Divine becoming. 551

The holocaust of the good was sometimes
 necessary to compel
 the return of the larger harmony,
 the truer felicity. 552

Maithili could see no more than a part
 of the complex cosmic play,
 and perhaps there were more crises ahead
 and stormier gulfs to cross. 553

The sainted Maitreyi, however, had
 with her alchemic contact
 helped Sita to find the infinity—
 the crystal essence—within. 554

And in defiance of seeming, she could
 hold her own inviolate
 against a wilderness of Ravan's
 and all their mercenaries. 555

She recalled the heroic Jatayu
 giving fight to Ravana:
 hadn't he fallen, the Bird-King would have told,
 Rama of her abduction! 556

Yet although bemoaning her current plight,
 she still struck a spring of hope,
 felt certain that Rama would come, and then —
 death for Lanka's denizens! 557

"I'm certain," she almost hissed, "Ravana
 and his titan brood will die,
 and I'll hear the women's lamentations
 in every house in Lanka. 558

This Lanka will then look like a smoke-filled
 cremation-ground, with corpses
 burning in the streets, and fleets of vultures
 hovering over the earth. 559

Yes, when Rama comes to know I am here,
 his fatal darts will bring down
 this city and its warriors, and Night
 will descend upon this place." 560

A pause, and sobbing some more, for Sita's
 heart of compassion suffered
 tremors thinking of Lanka's bereaved ones
 and her own present despair. 561

"I wonder if my heart is adamant,"
 she mused, "that it can defy
 disintegration; this is why, for all
 my dolour, it will not break. 562

Yes, how else can this life of pain and shame
 endure so long, for I should
 have died ere now, being wrested apart
 from my lord and source of life!" 563

Then like a fateful backlash the word came:
 "Severed from Rama, with no
 hope of release from Ravana's clutches,
 I think I should end my life!" 564

O'erhearing this, the demonesses shrilled:

"Fool! you'll commit this heinous
crime? Hurrah! We will then devour your flesh
with relish and fulfilment!"

565

Awakened just then and taking at once
the measure of Sita's plight,
the good Trijata felt as though wounded
and screamed at the wardresses:

566

"Wicked ones! eat me, if you will; devour
yourselves — but not Janaki.

Even now I saw a vision, truthful,
frightful — my hairs stand on end!"

567

As the creatures crowded round Trijata,
she reported how she dreamt
of Rama and Lakshmana all in white
drawn in a white car by swans;

568

then the Brothers, in their native halo,
seated on an elephant:
white-robed Sita waiting on Sveta's crest:
the meeting and reunion!

569

She saw all three over Lanka, and they
flew to far-off Ayodhya
where the Rishis installed Rama as King
with all the holy waters:

570

"And I saw Janaka's fair daughter shine
in the panoply of white
robes, garlands of pure white flowers, and rare
rich scents and the finest pastes.

571

I saw the celestials with folded hands
praising Rama and Sita,
and the nymphs in a mighty ecstasy
breaking into song and dance."

572

And ah the contrast: Trijata saw too
the clean-shaven Ravana
smeared with oil, robed in black, drunk and reeling,
and sinking into the mire.

573

The dismaying dream-sequence projected
Lanka overwhelmed by fire
and all the fabled wealth of Ravana
crash and fall into the sea.

574

And Trijata concluded: "Foolish ones!
 seek forgiveness of Sita;
 I see good omens, fair times are ahead;
 she'll save you when the time comes." 575

Well left alone to herself, and hearing
 odd snatches of Trijata's
 recital of her dream, Maithili now
 sounded bleak negation's depths. 576

But two months more, and these must seem endless
 like the last night in prison
 spent by a criminal condemned to die—
 the prospect was death-in-life! 577

And at the end of the grace-given time,
 the treacherous Ravana,
 failing to have his way, would get her hacked
 to pieces and feed on them. 578

The thought came as a stab again: dazzled
 by the phantom deer, she had
 sent Rama away, and in her frenzy
 Lakshmana too,—what folly! 579

Rama the god of her idolatry,
 Rama of firm vows, strong arms,
 Rama friend of all, her Rama hadn't come
 all these ten months to save her! 580

Better batter her heart, and end her life:
 yet who would give her poison
 or a sword to snuff out her spark of life?
 Perhaps her strong plait would do! 581

But the deeper listening of her soul
 had registered some phrases
 of Trijata's recital, and charged her
 with a residual hope. 582

As Sita stood there tremulous, clutching
 the branch of the Simsupa,
 her left thigh trembled, her fair left eye throbbed,
 and her left arm thrilled for long. 583

Indeed, the whole ensemble of her limbs
 had tremors of excitement,
 and a familiar song-bird now warbled
 the nearing dawn of new times. 584

And as Sita, her eyes shining, her teeth
flashing like pomegranate seeds,
stood near the tree, her dust-laden garments
slipped a little from her hips. 585

A sure auspicious sign, this, and Sita,
hearing Trijata's last words,
said involuntarily: "I'll forgive
and save them when the time comes!" 586

In response to the rich cumulation
of fair omens, once more she
felt alive, like a drought-time seed after
an unexpected downpour. 587

There was verily a newness in her,
her lips reddened like ripe fruit,
her eyelids were arching and beautiful,
her tresses were long and dark. 588

With her fever of anxiety lessened,
her spirits reviving fast,
she was the waxing Moon on a bleak night—
radiant was Sita's face! 589

She felt reborn, 'twas not yet day, and her
wardresses had gone to sleep;
and the silent blissful hour seemed pregnant
with the nectar of the Gods. 590

Canto 42: Sita and Hanuman

As if justifying her intuitions
a trained voice broke the stillness,
and Maithili heard in clear rhythmic spans
the Rama story in brief: 591

“King Dasaratha, renowned, virtuous,
admired of Rajarishis,
fosterer, prosperous, magnanimous,
head of the Ikshvaku race: 592

his well-beloved eldest son, Rama,
was endowed with rare merit;
the best of archers, the prop of justice,
the scourge of his enemies: 593

redeeming his father's word, Rama lived
in the woods with his wife and
brother, and in self-defence killed Khara
and his Rakshasa army. 594

In revenge, deploying a magic deer,
Ravana decoyed the Prince,
then his brother, and spurred by lust, carried
away Sita, Rama's wife. 595

Wandering in search of Sita, Rama
made a pact with Surgriva
and helped him to kill his brother Vali
and gain the Vanara throne. 596

Sugriva's corps are scouring the quarters,
but guided by Sampati,
Jatayu's brother, I have arrived here
having flown across the sea. 597

The Sita whose form, features, complexion
and effulgent graciousness
Rama knew and spoke about — that Sita
I now see here in this Grove.” 598

Following the direction of the voice
Sita raised her head, looked through
her straying curls, and saw a Vanara
seated among the branches. 599

Was she dreaming or awake? A monkey?

An inauspicious spectre!

But this was no dream, for she hadn't slept since
the sundering from Rama.

600

Breathing always the Rama ambience,

had she perhaps imagined

the recital of the Rama story,

and now saw this strange monkey!

601

But no! fancy couldn't take so firm a shape,

nor make that sweet recital;

and Sita fervently prayed to the gods

that what she heard might come true.

602

As if answering her, the Vanara

stepped down and stopped before her

in reverence as she still stood clutching

a branch of the Simsupa.

603

Saluting her with palms joined o'er the head,

the Vanara spoke gently:

"Who are you, Devi, O gracious Presence?

Rohini? Arundhati?

604

You seem a goddess, but why do hot tears

of anguish stream from your eyes?

From which world have you strayed here by mistake

that you're so melancholy?

605

You stand on solid ground, and breathe deeply:

you may not be a goddess,

your body's signs reveal your princely birth

and marriage to royalty.

606

Your beauty is beyond human measure;

askesis moulds your body,

and boundless your sorrow: by these tokens

you must be Raghava's wife."

607

Vaidehi felt pleased with the mien and speech

of the red-faced Vanara

and acknowledged she was King Janaka's

daughter and Prince Rama's wife.

608

She spoke of their happy life together

in Ayodhya, of the missed

coronation because of Kaikeyi,

and the consequent exile.

609

Like Lakshmana, Rama's brother, Sita
 had shared the exile too, and
 all three had enjoyed the austerities
 and ardours of forest life. 610

Then, thirteen years after, she was stolen
 by the vicious Ravana:
 "Two months' grace-time remains," she concluded,
 "which means I must end my life." 611

Grasping the gravity of Sita's plight,
 the Vanara promised her
 that leonine Rama and Lakshmana
 would liberate her in time. 612

This heartening word from the Vanara
 made her recall the saying:
 'If one endures long enough, late or soon
 comes the meed of happiness!' 613

Sita saw that this was exemplified
 in her own life-history,
 and she conversed with Rama's messenger
 in a mood of trustfulness. 614

And yet, as the Vanara grew closer,
 the fears erupted again:
 wasn't this the disguised Ravana himself?
 She slumped to the ground in fright. 615

Reacting to her sudden revulsion
 born of a primordial fear,
 the Vanara made obeisance to her
 in submissive devotion. 616

She distrusted still, dazed as she was by
 terror, but as Hanuman
 sustained his stance of reverence for long,
 she felt emboldened to speak: 617

"Aren't you the chameleonic Rakshasa
 expert in deceit and crime
 who hid his native form in ochre robes
 and posed as an anchorite? 618

These apprehensions may be misconceived,
 for in your gaze I have felt
 the spray of ineffable quietude;
 I feel inclined to trust you . . ." 619

Once more: was it mere hallucination?
or a coward fixation?

She thought 'twas the fiend Ravana — only
ogres changed their shapes at will! 620

Thus wavering one way and another
about the phantom in front,
the distracted Janaki was silent
and took no notice of him. 621

Guessing the deep distress afflicting her,
the Vanara resorted
to the anodyne of a flow of sweet
speech in godlike Rama's praise: 622

"He is like the Sun in his majesty,
like the Moon in his brightness;
he is like Manmatha in his features,
and he's the scourge of his foes. 623

This same Rama will soon invade Lanka
with Lakshmana, and the brave
Sugriva's Vanara hosts; and certain,
Ravana will be destroyed. 624

Before I left on this expedition,
Rama tried to describe you
to help me in my search, but having failed,
he spoke in his helplessness: 625

'How can I describe her, I'mn her features,
Maruti? When you see her,
you'll know at once 'tis she and no other,
for there's no second Sita. 626

Although many are praised for their beauty —
the full Moon, the blown Lotus,
for example — the Moon too has its spots,
the flower its flawed petals! 627

We cite as samples of sweetness in speech
the prattle of innocence,
the music of the *kuyil*, the notes from
the flute, or the Veena's strings. 628

And talking of taste and palate's delight,
what's more welcome than honey?
and if sovereign efficacy be sought,
there's elixir *amruu* 629

But Sita's limbs are perfect in themselves,
 and in their sweet ensemble;
 and her speech is the living quintessence
 of all Nature's sweetnesses. 630

The power of her angelic presence,
 the music of her converse,
 act like the taste of honey and nectar!
 Thus spoke your dear Lord to me 631

Devi, I am Sugriva's minister,
 and Hanuman is my name;
 I'm not what you think I am; shed all fear,
 have the fullest faith in me." 632

Feeling more at ease, Sita wished to know
 how Hanuman met Rama,
 how the human and Vanara Princes
 agreed to help each other. 633

Delighted, Hanuman replied: "Rama
 the aggregate of powers
 and graces, and Lakshmana his double
 except for the complexion: 634

for Rama is sky-blue, and his brother
 is golden-hued! While they were
 searching for you everywhere, I met them
 and conveyed them to my King. 635

Sugriva was on Rishyamukha Hill
 cast out of his Kishkindha
 and deprived of Ruma, his wife, by his
 strong elder brother, Vali. 636

It must have struck Raghava as most odd
 that an elder could ill-treat
 a younger brother by casting him out
 and seizing his consort too! 637

After introductions, Rama consoled
 Sugriva for losing both
 wife and kingdom to his spiteful brother,
 and gave promise of redress. 638

Being told then of Sita's abduction,
 Sugriva asked to be brought
 the jewels you had dropped while Ravana
 was carrying you away. 639

When I displayed the ornaments before
 Rama, he swooned at their sight;
 reviving, he took them on his lap, mused,
 reminisced, and felt great pain. 640

Rama's anguish was a fire enkindled
 by the ghee-like jewellery,
 and I had to speak diverse soothing words
 to put out the leaping flames. 641

Now emerged the concordat between him
 and my Chief: Vali would die,
 the Vanaras' search for you would begin,
 and end with our finding you. 642

Rama said with emotion: 'Sugriva,
 you're my brother too, the sixth
 added to the four of us, the Raghus,
 and the fifth, Chieftain Guha.' 643

There was still the fratricidal conflict
 looming ahead, and 'twas thus
 from Kishkindha's outer walls Sugriva
 roared his challenge at Vali. 644

The duel between the two Vanaras —
 yes, brother against brother,
 warrior and warrior in grapple! —
 was a traumatic event. 645

The fighters were almost evenly matched,
 and 'twas Rama's dart, unleashed
 on the sly, that achieved the fatal hit,
 and Vali fell down at last. 646

There were recriminations on his part
 and rending lamentations
 by Tara as also the remorseful
 Sugriva; all were in tears. 647

She had indeed, with a percipience
 uncanny, seen in Rama
 the image of the scourge of God, and warned
 Vali against the fighting. 648

Alas, the perversity of the male,
 his untrammelled aptitude
 for self-assertion and ill-temperate
 aggression and violence! 649

The moment was emotionally charged,
 and brought its own katharsis:
 for, in Rama's presence, all passion spent,
 a deep calm settled again. 650

Vali's soul left his body reconciled
 to Sugriva, having first
 entrusted to his care both Angada
 the Prince and bereaved Tara. 651

And so, with Rama's blessings, Sugriva
 became the Vanara King,
 Angada the Crown Prince, and both Tara
 and Ruma the King's consorts. 652

After the rainy season, Sugriva
 stirred into activity
 and sent out hundreds of thousands to scour
 land and sea in search of you. 653

Divided into four parties, they were
 asked to explore the quarters.
 Satavali's to the north; Panasa's
 to the regions in the east; 654

Sushena and his stalwarts to the west,
 and Prince Angada himself
 was to march southward: and all were required
 to report within a month. 655

Along with General Tara, aged
 Jambavan, and numerous
 veterans, I was with Angada too,
 and we sleuthed extensively. 656

Day followed fruitless day, and our army,
 failing in the Vindhya-range,
 tried other places and lost many days
 and wallowed in frustration. 657

Once in our extremity of hunger
 and thirst we entered a cave
 vast and luxuriant; its care-taker,
 the gracious Swayamprabha. 658

When I told her about our wretched plight,
 that generous ascetic
 took pity, and we were allowed to eat
 fruits and roots, and have a drink. 659

Then the kind-hearted dame, by the power
 of her prolonged *tapasya*,
 transported us from that wondrous retreat
 to the hill-range near the sea. 660

Our time-limit having expired, we thought
 of mass suicide, but chance
 led us to Sampati, and this Vulture
 told us we should seek you here. 661

Being Jatayu's brother, Sampati
 felt grieved to know of his death;
 and deposed seeing you carried away
 by the wicked Ravana. 662

Although disabled and immobilised,
 he retained his godlike sight,
 and he could still see in far-off Lanka
 both Ravana and yourself. 663

Heartened by the news, we rushed to the shore
 and felt intimidated
 by the sea, but I agreed to cross it,
 and dispelled all anxiety. 664

During my flight of hundred Yojanas
 many were my adventures,
 but I arrived safe, and under cover
 of night slipped into Lanka. 665

First the risen mount, Mainaka, offered
 rest and welcome, but I could
 only pat the crest with gratitude and
 fly on, for I couldn't tarry! 666

And Surasa with her wide-gaping mouth
 was my next interruption,
 but I shot in and came out instantly
 and persevered with my flight. 667

The third impediment was Simhika
 an evil shadow-snatcher,
 but I shot in and came out instantly
 that dangerous she-demon. 668

And Lanka Devi last of all, who tried
 to prevent my entering
 the City: I had to give blow for blow,
 and then she turned most friendly. 669

It is as though, whenever one embarks
 on something urgent, friends, gods,
 devils, foes, all are against you, but tact,
 cunning, strength, Grace see you through. 670

For hours I scoured the Rakshasa quarters
 in my diminutive size,
 then the palace, Pushpaka, gynaeceum:
 and nowhere could I find you. 671

In my desperation, I now invoked
 the Name of Rama, and glimpsed
 this Grove, and from this tree I could see you—
 sad, brave and defiant still. 672

As for me, my father was the hero,
 Vanara Kesari; his
 wife, Anjana, was my mother; I was
 sired by the Wind-God, Vayu. 673

Devi, accept me as the Wind-God's son,
 as Sugriva's minister
 and Rama's devoted servant come here
 to advance your interests. 674

Princess! denied you, life-giving presence,
 Rama is under the siege
 of misery like a mighty mountain
 caught in a volcanic fire. 675

But Devi! it bodes well that my crossing
 of the sea hasn't been in vain;
 and mine will be the fame of finding you
 and reporting to Rama. 676

Once he hears the news, that tiger among
 men, Rama, will lose no time
 to invade Lanka, destroy Ravana
 and reclaim you as his own." 677

Although paled and thinned by her suffering,
 Sita revived listening
 to the narrative, and convinced herself
 of Hanuman's truthfulness. 678

Canto 43: Signet-Ring and Crest-Jewel

Her patient sufferance hadn't been in vain,
and o'erwhelmed by Hanuman's
infallible integrity, Sita
shed tears of joy abounding. 679

The gratified Hanuman, now anxious
to take leave of Maithili,
said humbly: "Be pleased to accept this Ring
inscribed with Raghava's Name. 680

The Mahatma has sent this to instil
in you total trust in me.
May auspicious things rain on you, may you
see the end of your sorrows." 681

Receiving the Ring, she gazed at it long
as though at Rama himself;
and transfigured by a rush of pure joy
she addressed the Wind-God's son: 682

"Best of Vanaras, you're wise, valiant,
victorious; by crossing
the sea's hundred Yojānas in a leap
you've made them a cow's-hoof mire. 683

Sent by Rama, you are truly seasoned
for conversation with me,
for he wouldn't send one as his messenger
without full inner credit. 684

You've spoken of Rama and Saumitri,
of my Lord's lacerations,
agonies and privations consequent
on separation from me. 685

Neither his illustrious father, nor his
mother, nor anyone else,
has a place in his heart equal to me,
O messenger from Rama! 686

But I must wonder why, when the Brothers
are strong enough to chastise
the gods themselves, the end of my sorrows
doesn't seem yet to be in sight." 687

Perceiving the veiled complaint, Hanuman
returned a soothing reply:

“Rama isn’t aware you’re lodged here, but now
he will swing into action. 688

When he hears my report, he’ll mobilise
Sugriva’s immense army,
cross the sea, enter Lanka and destroy
the resisting Rakshasas. 689

Vaidehi! you’ll soon see Rama seated
on the Prasravana Hill,
luminous like Indra himself on his
Airāvata in heaven. 690

Rama has so long been in a stupor
or paralysis of will,
living on sweet-sad memories of you
that make all else unreal. 691

He’s so completely lost in thought of you
that he will not drive away
from his body flies or gnats or insects
or even venomous snakes. 692

Whenever he sees a flower or fruit,
or whatever found favour
with you, he is deeply touched, cries ‘Ah Love!’
and meltingly invokes you. 693

But Devi, this will change: the royal Prince,
that stern fulfiller of vows,
who now trembles with ‘Sita!’ on his lips,
will attain you in no time.” 694

Sita felt her sadness wane as she heard
Rama praised, but his sessions
with sorrow and his sufferings revived
her pain, and the right words came: 695

“O•Vanara, what you’ve told me is like
nectar mingled with poison:
Rama thinks of nothing else but me, -- and
Rama is steeped in sadness! 696

Man’s but a plaything of Fate that nooses
his life with the Karmic cord:
for proof see the sad plight of Saumitri,
and of Rama and myself. 697

Alas, like a ship wrecked on the high seas,
 floating, finding rest at last,
 when will Rama see the end of his woes
 and safely land on the shore? 698

When will my Lord effect Ravana's death,
 the Rakshasas' destruction,
 the devastation of Lanka, and then
 attain reunion with me? 699

O Vanara, of the one-year grace-time
 but two months remain; Rama
 should now act with a kick of urgency
 and redeem me from this hell." 700

Scenting her sense of crisis, Hanuman
 made a humble submission:
 "Have no doubt, Devi, my report will send
 Rama promptly to Lanka. 701

Otherwise, with you seated on my back,
 I can take you to Rama;
 mark Vaidehi, even as I came here,
 I'll follow the same airway." 702

Taken aback by the sheer novelty
 of the suggestion, Sita
 tried to dismiss it as a childish whim,
 a Vanara fantasy. 703

Hanuman felt hurt at being measured
 by his diminutive size,
 and so he withdrew a little, then waxed
 into his native grandeur, 704

and faced the dazed Maithili as a blaze
 of sudden glory, and said:
 "See I've strength enough to carry Lanka,
 its King, hills, and everything!" 705

Now Sita stared at the formidable
 Maruti and made reply:
 "Great Vanara, I see your massive form,
 majesty and native might: 706

could one with mere human competence have
 crossed the wide sea as you have?
 I see you've the needed strength, but there are
 other things to consider. 707

With you flying at wind-speed and so high,
 I might tumble from your back,
 fall among the crocodiles and become
 prized food for those fierce creatures. 708

Or, as my rescuer, you will provoke
 the Rakshasas to fight you,
 and in the heat of the struggle, I may
 become a casualty. 709

I don't deny that, in an engagement,
 you can annihilate all
 the Rakshasas, but that will only mean
 a loss of face for Rama. 710

And there's this too: as Rama's wife, can I
 touch another by myself?
 As for Ravana, 'twas not my doing;
 I was seized, I was helpless. 711

O best of Vanas, get my Lord here,
 and soon; and Lakshmana too;
 if Rama destroys Ravana and takes
 me back, that will be splendid." 712

"What you've spoken, Devi," said Hanuman,
 "accords with your native bent,
 the code of chastity, and the demands
 of feminine propriety. 713

Being that rare Mahatma's wedded spouse,
 who except you, Devi, can
 lay down and practise so resolutely
 such a knife-edged rule of life? 714

When I made my respectful suggestion,
 I was tortured by pity
 for, your plight, and my aim was to take you
 at once to Rama your Lord. 715

I spoke out of my profoundest concern,
 but since you feel otherwise,
 render some token to convince Rama
 that all I report is true." 716

In answer the radiant Sita spoke,
 her anguished words stained with tears:
 "You may tell Rama of the incident
 of the vicious wicked crow: 717

'Once in the Ashrama near the river
 Mandākini, feeling tired
 after long wanderings, you sought me out
 and found some rest on my lap. 718

Just then a crow attacked me with its beak,
 and when I drove it away,
 it returned, hovered near and pecked at me
 causing me great annoyance. 719

In my anger I pulled out my skirt-string
 to frighten the crow away,
 but my raiment suddenly slipped, and you
 opened your eyes and saw me. 720

Husband dear! you saw me vexed and inflamed
 by the persecuting crow,
 and my face was all tear-stained while I tried
 my best to make my eyes dry. 721

You slept on my lap again, but the crow
 renewed its attack, spilled blood,
 and sharply roused by the warm drops falling,
 you seized the situation. 722

Viewing my wounded breasts and the callous
 criminal crow with its claws
 stained with blood, you knew it was Indra's son
 deserving quick punishment. 723

Seizing a blade of *kusa* grass, you charged
 it with Brahmic potency
 for the crow's prompt chastisement; it then burst
 into cataclysmic fire. 724

From that moment on, the fire chased the crow
 everywhere around the sky,
 and the culprit sought in vain to evade
 the terrible pursuer. 725

Having tried all the gods in vain, the crow
 made surrender at your feet,
 and offered as target one of its eyes:
 and you vouchsafed it pardon. 726

Lord of the Worlds! the Brahmic-shaft was used
 against a crow for my sake,
 yet why are you holding back from felling
 the thief who stole me away?" 727

Now she took out from a knot in her dress
 her crest-jewel, and gave it
 to Hanuman, and desired it should be
 safely conveyed to Rama : 728

“This is a much prized token that my Lord
 will identify at once,
 and this Choodamani will awaken
 the happiest memories.” 729

Hanuman received the jewel, wore it
 on his finger (his hand was
 too big), went round Sita with folded hands,
 and stood as if expectant. 730

Marking that he was about to withdraw,
 she addressed her parting words :
 “O Vanara, give good tidings of me
 to Rama and Lakshmana. 731

That man of Dharmā, Saumitri, renounced
 all wealth, power and glory,
 and followed Rama to the woods, and still
 serves him with deep devotion. 732

Alas, that hero, Lakshmana, wasn't there
 when I was carried away :
 a marvellous brother, solicitous
 in his service to Rama. 733

Aye, he's the perfect man of works who does
 any task assigned to him :
 make inquiries about the well-being
 of Rama's best-loved brother. 734

And you may give Rama this token too :
 ‘Once when my forehead's red-mark
 had come off, you playfully made it good
 with some red mineral dust ! 735

O receive this crest-jewel I've guarded
 with infinite care, finding
 solace and peace whenever in distress,
 for always I saw you there.’ 736

Lastly, apprise Rama of the circuit
 of my woes, and make him soon
 deliver me from this dolorous sea --
 and may your pathway be fair !” 737

Having received godspeed from the tearful
Sita, Hanuman withdrew
reverentially, moved out of her sight
being lost among the trees.

Canto 44: Hanuman and Ravana

The Sun had risen, and Asoka Grove
with all Lanka was awake,
and life was aglow with its divers tints,
and another day began. 739

Left alone at last, Sita was a prey
to conflicting emotions—
happiness on having met Hanuman,
and sorrow on his leaving. 740

She thought for a while reviewing the scenes
since the hour before the Dawn;
but if the overture was Ravana,
the end note was Maruti! 741

Sunrise over Asoka meant a splash
of orchestrated colour,
the scattering of mingled fragrances,
the leap of manifold life. 742

During the long silent hours of the night
pensive Sita had communed
with the dumb citizenry of the Grove
and shared their intense yearning. 743

Darkness was a solvent in its own right,
and diminished, harmonised
and melted all sharp angularities
of motion and assertion. 744

'Twas Grace under pressure of the blanket
of Night and the opiate
of sleep, for that was the creative hour
of the dynamic helix. 745

Grace indeed that in that solemnity
Sita could hold communion
with the exhilarating processes
of the climb of Consciousness. 746

Such stuff as insensate water and air
penetrated forms of life
and merged with them and sustained their growth and
accomplished self-conversion. 747

All life with its million variations
 from grass, plant and tree to fish,
 insect, bird, reptile, animal and man,
 all in quest of the Unknown: 748

higher still and higher, — broader, broader! —
 and deeper too; from the depths
 to the heights and back, a two-way traffic,
 a world-stair of Consciousness! 749

Who set the lifeless questing after Life,
 Sita had often wondered;
 also, who set Life voyaging through seas
 of daring speculation? 750

But such thinking sprints met no wayside inns,
 and, forever restless, must
 race beyond the flickering pins of light,
 and seek the Luminous One. 751

And the leap of transcendence could land you
 — O where? — perhaps happily
 on the inexpressible Permanent,
 the ultimate mystery. 752

Multitudinous matter, the countless
 forms of life, the myriad
 creepers of consciousness, and the blinding
 heights of Illumination! 753

Caught in this magic web of the Real,
 Sita saw nor beginning
 nor end, the still centre was everywhere
 and the boundary nowhere. 754

As her soul went in search of the Divine,
 didn't all Asoka, Lanka,
 all the world, join in the great adventure,
 coalescing and hastening? 755

She pursued, and the Divine gave the slip,
 or teasingly, blindingly,
 popped up here — there! — though still elusive, till
 she found Him within at last. 756

Now in broad daylight, she met the keen gaze
 of the floral opulence
 around, and breathed the choicest fragrances
 from the extensive pleasure. 757

A whole multitude of hibiscus flames
 speaking the language of love,
 beauty, bliss of creative ecstasy
 and the plenitude of grace; 758

and Kadamba with its orange-yellow
 magnificence and promise
 of the transformation of the darkness
 by the supramental Sun; 759

the jasmine with its simple purity
 and scented single whiteness,
 and the Kumuda white water-lily,
 and tender Pārijāta; 760

and pointed Champaka strongly perfumed
 and strikingly cream-yellow,
 causing a sure movement of consciousness
 towards inner perfection; 761

chrysanthemums of a jumble of hues
 exuding vitality,
 and sweet basil insinuating the joy
 of the coming reunion: 762

and orange-red Asoka declaring
 the annulment of sorrow,
 and the many-petalled golden lotus
 enshrining her Raghava! 763

All Nature, the scented glory of greens
 and the rhythm and music
 of the Grove's pulsating inhabitants
 made Earth a smiling heaven. 764

The colour-ranges from the dense and dark
 at the base to the orange
 and sapphire of the high altitudes formed
 a rainbow-apocalypse. 765

For the first time since the brutal transplant
 from Panchavati, Sita
 felt a great peace descend and permeate
 all her body, mind and soul. 766

Ah . . . but what was that? There was some tumult
 in the air with birds and beasts
 making weird noises, trees breaking, falling
 and unleashing confusion 767

Shaken from their slumber, the wardresses
 went round and saw 'twas the work
 of a monkey, perhaps the one they had
 seen retreating from Sita. 768

Some rushed to her and queried: "What is it?
 Who is it? Whence has it come?
 Didn't you hold converse with this huge monster?
 There's no danger in telling!" 769

But Sita answered non-committally:
 "How should I know? It's for you
 to ferret out who he is, what he'll do:
 one snake knows another's moves!" 770

Left once more to herself, Sita wondered
 at the new development:
 what was the reason for this commotion?
 Was it Maruti indeed? 771

Her own small space around the Simsupa
 seemed rather insulated,
 but beyond, — the Temple itself crashing,
 Hell seemed to have been let loose. 772

Racing fast, the Sun was already up
 in the sky, and still Sita
 held herself in suspense near her peaceful
 hospitable Simsupa. 773

Now rushed to her Trijata, her faithful
 friend and counsellor, and told
 a breath-taking tale of the Vanara's
 rampaging activities. 774

"Would you believe it, Maithili," she asked,
 "that entirely by himself,
 this giant monkey could have engineered
 havoc on so great a scale?" 775

It beggars all myth and legend, — listen:
 first the mauling of the Grove;
 next, the swift killing of the Kinkaras;
 then, the Temple in ruins! 776

And each time, having done his handiwork
 with wild precipitancy,
 the terrific creature settled itself
 at the Asoka gateway. 777

Mountain-like in his awesome majesty,
 wielding the heavy crow-bar
 as a personal weapon for offence
 and defence, the creature cried: 778

'I'm the Wind-God's son, Hanuman; I serve
 Rama the Kosala Prince
 who's the hero of numberless exploits;
 and I'm the foe of his foes. 779

I'm used to fighting my battles with trees,
 rocks and crow-bars, and I can
 bear down in a thousand ways; a thousand
 Ravana's cannot shock me. 780

Even as the Titans dumbly look on,
 I shall raze down this city,
 salute the wronged Maithili, and return
 to Rama feeling fulfilled.' 781

With such report, coming in, Ravana
 was alarmed, for this monkey,
 Hanuman, Rama's envoy, put to shame
 the total might of Lanka. 782

After the destruction of the Temple,
 growing anxious, Ravana
 despatched Jambumali, the doughty son
 of Minister Prahasta. 783

Jambumali fared no better, and now
 Lanka's King, his eyes rolling,
 sent the seven ministers' sons, fire-bright,
 strong-limbed fighters, all of them. 784

To no purpose, again: the Vanara,
 having killed the warriors
 and ready for others, returned once more
 to his seat on the gateway. 785

No laughing matter this, thought Ravana,
 and sent forth the five heroes:
 Virupaksha, Yupaksha, Durdhara,
 Pragasa, Bhasakarna. 786

Ablaze like fire, the Big Five sallied forth
 in their chariots, converged
 on strong, resolute, reckless Hanuman,
 and discharged their lethal darts. 787

In vain, for the puissant Vanara made
 short work of them all, wielding
sal tree, hill-top, whatever came handy,
 and returned to the gateway. 788

As Ravana grew visibly nervous,
 he saw his bright son, Aksha,
 who received the King's command by a look
 and went for the Vanara. 789

A clash of mighty opposites ensued,
 and while Aksha's archery
 wrung the great Vanara's admiration,
 that brave Prince too had to die. 790

Now back at the ornamental gateway,
 Hanuman sat on its crest
 and blazed like the Lord of Death awaiting
 the next spate of destruction. 791

Preserving his outer poise, Lanka's King
 turned in his extremity
 to his brave son, impatient Indrajit,
 invincible in battle: 792

'Even as I send you on this mission
 my heart prompts me against it;
 and yet this is the true chivalric Code
 appropriate to kingship. 793

I almost think this is no *mère* monkey,
 an oversized forester,
 but the Almighty come down in this form
 to avenge my transgressions. 794

How else could he wield rocks, tree-trunks, crow-bars
 as weapons of war, causing
 destruction on a scale we had not seen,
 and a gory menace still! 795

With a massive killer like this monster,
 armies are of little use;
 neither can the sharp *vajra* be a help,
 for he excels Vayu's strength. 796

O conqueror of enemies! practise
 all the arts and science of war,
 but the best use of war issues only
 from the defeat of the foe.' 797

In the hectic engagement that followed,
 the ferocious combatants
 were evenly matched, and the Archer failed
 to break the Vanara's strength. 798

'If he cannot be killed,' thought Indrajit,
 'let me capture him at least;
 thus determined, he loosed the Brahma-shaft,
 and Maruti submitted. 799

Indrajit's minions now bound with strong cords
 the mountainous Vanara,
 and they're converging with the prized captive
 to the presence of the King. 800

O Maithili, while I rushed to tell you
 all this, Anala has gone
 to the Court and will presently return
 and report what happens there. 801

But there's no defeat on Hanuman's face:
 he looks truly triumphant,
 as though this confrontation with the King
 is exactly what he wants." 802

Trijata's brisk narrative of events
 left Maithili in a daze,
 and she didn't know what to make of it all,
 and could only turn inward. 803

At once informative and comforting,
 Trijata dispelled Sita's
 apprehensions regarding Ravana's
 predictable reprisals. 804

Some time after Trijata had taken
 leave of Sita promising
 she would return later, a Rakshasi
 came with glee to give fresh news: 805

"That same red-complexioned monkey, Sita,
 that lately conversed with you,
 the same is being pushed and knocked about
 with his tail-end set on fire!" 806

Abandoned to her anguish, Sita prayed
 from her heart's profoundest depths:
 "If I've loved Rama, if I'm chaste and pure,
Fire! be cool to Hanuman! 807

If Rama the ensoulment of Dharma
 yet believes in the scriptures
 of my faith, my desire for reunion;
Fire! be cool to Hanuman! 808

If with steadfast Sugriva's help, Rama
 is destined to rescue me
 from this sad dungeon of captivity,
Fire! be cool to Hanuman! 809

Sita's seething mind was hardly able
 to keep pace with the events:
 suppose Hanuman came to grief, what then?
 No, no, it must not happen! 810

Just then, as a welcome fair wind of change,
 the resourceful Anala
 brought a weighty basket of latest news
 concerning the Vanara: 811

"Sita, Sita, wonders will never cease,
 and oh! the things I've witnessed!
 You know Indrajit bound the Vanara
 with the infallible dart: 812

out of respect for Brahma, Hanuman
 lay as one willingly bound,
 thereby hoping to confront Ravana
 and take his proper measure. 813

But when the oafs bound Maruti with cords,
 gone was the shaft's potency;
 yet the Vanara shammed submission still,
 though Indrajit wasn't deceived. 814

Arrived at the Court, a tense atmosphere
 awaited Anjaneya:
 the King had lost Aksha, and Prahasta
 his dear son, Jambumali. 815

And other dignitaries had suffered
 likewise, and were resentful;
 but, then, the Vanara had a bearing
 which seemed to compel respect. 816

When Prahasta, as ordered by the King,
 addressed sly leading questions,
 Hanuman avoided all evasion
 and gave a forthright answer: 817

'Know me, O King, as Prince Rama's envoy
and Sugriva's Minister.

Rama, King Dasaratha's son, married
Sita, Janaka's daughter.

818

In the woods, the chaste and holy Sita,
left alone, was found stolen;

Rama's ally, King Sugriva's millions
are seeking her everywhere.

819

Arrived here, and exploring your Lanka,
I discovered her at last

in Asoka Grove in the neighbourhood
of your vast palace complex.

820

O wise Ruler! you are schooled in Dharma,
you've won the fruits of *tapas*;

it's not proper for you to seek to force
another's wife to your will.

821

Take my counsel, King, and forthwith return
Sita to Rama her Lord;

I've found her here, but the rest of the tale
is for Rama to ordain.

822

Having had *darshan* of Sita, I sense
the Infinite behind her;

I warn you, you're harbouring unaware
a fell five-hooded serpent!

823

The same that you see as Sita, the same
you've cruelly imprisoned,

know her for the Night of Dissolution
hovering over Lanka.

824

Exorcise this burden on your shoulders,
this certain embrace of Death

you've invited on yourself by seizure
of Sita: undo the wrong!

825

Look, look at Lanka with its tall buildings
caught in conflagration caused

by Rama's blazing anger and Sita's
brazier of chastity.'

826

On hearing these fearless and truthful words
that were unpalatable,

with wild and whirling eyes the enraged King
ordered Hanuman's killing.

827

Ravana's leap of spite would have silenced
 the Council to acquiescence,
 but Vibhishana, my father, argued
 against the proposed action: 828

'The diplomatic Code,' he said, 'forbids
 the killing of an envoy;
 but lesser punishments are permitted,
 like token mutilation.' 829

Ravana accepted the suggestion
 with alacrity, adding:
 'For monkeys, the tail is an ornament:
 set fire to Hanuman's tail! 830

Let his friends and foes gather around him,
 and commiserate, or sneer!
 Let him be paraded, too, in our streets
 with his bright and burning tail!' 831

The titans with childish glee tied cotton
 smeared with oil round the tail-end
 and set it on fire: and glowing Sun-like,
 Hanuman brandished his tail. 832

He enjoyed being taken round, the fire
 hardly paining or spreading;
 and soon the fire was cool like sandal-paste,
 or soothing freshening breeze. 833

How was it that induced contact with fire
 didn't spread on all sides of him?
 Although the tail-end was ablaze, he felt
 no unease or burning pain. 834

Indeed, the fire was like friendly sandal
 or ice-bag tied to the tail!
 The Grace Divine must have come to his help
 and made cool Agni himself. 835

Sure enough Rama's prowess and glory,
 Sita's compassion, and his
 father the Wind-God's love had made Agni
 desist from injuring him. 836

But Sita, what started happening next
 no tongue can describe: provoked
 by the taunts of the ogres, Hanuman
 split the cords by his main force, 837

leapt like lightning o'er houses, palaces,
 streets, monuments; and his tail—
 still burning like hell-fire—shone with brilliance
 and devastated Lanka. 838

All those extravagant residences
 with their gold-plated ladders
 and casements inlaid with rare gems and pearl
 crashed and fell down in a heap. 839

The massive conflagration, equalling
 a million Suns, spread over
 Lanka and emitted sounds like thunder
 shattering the Cosmic Egg. 840

Among the not many mansions wholly
 spared is my father's, but all
 Lanka echoes with the lamentations
 of those that have lost their all." 841

Promising to come later, Anala
 still visibly excited
 went back to the City, for disorder
 was the reigning order there. 842

In time Maruti's fury too was spent,
 he dipped his tail in the sea
 and gave vent to introspection about
 his incendiary exploits. 843

What, had he devastated the city?
 How fared Sita in the Grove?
 and Vibhishana, and the numberless
 innocents and blameless ones? 844

But just when he grovelled at the nadir
 of depression of spirits,
 his mind cleared, he saw good omens, and heard
 voices that were auspicious. 845

After all, could Agni go anywhere
 near the self-protected and
 holy and chaste Sita—wife of Rama!—
 and incarnate blessedness! 846

If deathless Agni, with his terrible
 propensity to burn all—
 everywhere!—had failed to scorch Hanuman,
 how could he approach Sita? 847

He rushed to the foot of the Simsupa,
 made obeisance to Sita,
 felt transcendently happy, and stood
 respectful to take her leave. 848

The parting was extremely poignant,
 and while Sita said anew:
 "Let Rama take me back to Ayodhya,
 I await his arrival," 849

Hanuman gave the solemn assurance:
 "The immaculate Rama —
 the scourge of his foes — will come and destroy
 Ravana, and redeem you." 850

Then, retreating from the Simsupa shade
 and Sita's benign presence,
 Hanuman ascended the Arishta
 and began his return flight. 851

'Twas evening, and the Western orange skies
 cast a rare luminous glow
 on Sita tranced in waiting, an inner
 flame presaging the future. 852

BOOK FIVE

YUDDHA

Canto 45: Hanuman Reports

- The heroic Vanara, Hanuman,
having seen Sita, disgraced
the Rakshasa, thrown Lanka's citizens
into confusion, took off 1
- from Arishta, sped through the upper air -
a shaft from a taut bow-string! -
and while approaching massive Mahendra
roared a peal of victory. 2
- Prince Angada, veteran Jambavan
and the rest were all ready
to receive Hanuman, and know from him
the outcome of his mission. 3
- Having first proclaimed 'SAW SITA', ending
all anxiety, he met them
in a clearance in the woods on the mount,
and became more explicit: 4
- "I met Devi Sita in Asoka
Grove, guarded by ogresses,
she's a steady stainless flame; all her thoughts
are centered in Raghava. 5
- grown pale through fasting, wears a single plait;
her locks unkempt and matted;
such is Sita, King Janaka's daughter,
whose gracious *darshan* I had." 6
- The assembled Vanaras were avid
for a fuller recital
of his adventures, and Marutī too
wasn't unwilling to respond. 7
- He spoke of his encounters on the way
with friendly Mount Mamaka,
next Surasa the mother of serpents,
then the ogress Simhika; .
- one way or another, Hanuman could
outwit or have his own way
with these diversionary intrusions
and hasten towards Lanka. 9

On reaching Ravana's sea-girt Lanka,
 before he could enter it
 under cover of night, Hanuman had
 to fell Lankini the guard. 10

Having wasted most of the night looking
 for Sita in Ravana's
 apartments and air-car, Pushpaka, and
 not finding her anywhere: 11

he had chanced upon Ravana's consorts
 in the gynaeceum lying
 in abandon in their *deshabille*,
 asleep after their revels; 12

he had seen Ravana himself lying
 drunk, stretched in his inconscience;
 and Mandodari, his imperious Queen,
 resting on another bed; 13

and he had meticulously explored
 all the more likely places
 like palace-interiors and arbours —
 but nowhere was Sita found! 14

Then had Hanuman invoked Rama's Name,
 glimpsed Asoka Grove ahead
 and from his shelter on a Simsupa
 had seen the divine Sita. 15

"Her limbs were wan," he said, "she looked wasted,
 she wore the same dress she had
 when the wicked Ravana forcibly
 seized and brought her to Lanka. 16

She seemed to writhe in agony and shame
 being teased from time to time
 by the guard, and looked like a trembling doe
 surrounded by tigresses." 17

Hanuman then spoke of the dawn-time sounds
 from Ravana's residence,
 a jumble of girdle and anklet bells
 and high-pitched ringing voices. 18

Now Ravana himself, with his consorts,
 had appeared before Sita,
 and he both wooed her in extravagant
 terms and scared her with his threats. 19

But feeling alike outraged and incensed
by the obstreperous King •
and undeterred by his ruthless two-month
ultimatum, she had said: 20

“Shameless Rakshasa! It’s astonishing
that, when you dare to address
such vicious words to mighty Rama’s wife,
your diseased tongue falls not dead!” 21

When she further charged him with cowardice
and sheer meanness of spirit,
he had rolled his blood-red eyes and raised his
fist as if he would hit her, 22

but the ugly situation was saved
by Mandodari the Queen
and the other consorts, who hurriedly
led away the Rakshasa. 23

Hanuman then described how Sita felt
poised on desperation’s brink,
when Trijata’s dream and some fair omens
revived Maithili once more. 24

Maruti then set forth how he contrived
to hold converse with Sita,
and received her crest-jewel as token
to be given to Rama. 25

When Sita had expressed her disbelief
the Vanara army could
cross the sea, Hanuman had assured her
none was his inferior, 26

and all were superior or equal,
and certainly the body
of Vanaras and bears would be able
to storm the gates of Lanka. 27

She had then given her parting message:
“‘If I’m not rescued within
the allowed grace-time, I’ll surely die, and
Rama won’t see me alive.” 28

The fire of agony within Sita
had kindled Hanuman’s rage,
and having taken leave of her, he had
got busy mauling the Grove. 29

He had wished too to measure Lanka's strength
 and defence dispositions,
 and create a chance to confront the King
 and warn him what lay in store. 30

And Maruti told with relish the tale
 of the divers engagements
 with Lanka's veterans and armed forces,
 and the panic he had caused. 31

Submitting at last to the Brahma-shaft,
 he had wangled a meeting
 with Ravana and spoken forthrightly
 of the wages of evil. 32

Of Vibhishana and of the burning
 of Lanka, Hanuman spoke,
 and of the further meeting with Sita,
 and the flight back to the Mount. 33

After this quick recapitulation
 of the exciting events,
 Hanuman paused for a while in distress
 till at last he found his voice: 34

"My mind knew peace when I saw Maithili
 the pure flame of chastity;
 although nonpareil in her askesis
 she yet abides in anguish. 35

Holy and immaculate, verily
 like Indrani's absorption
 in her Lord is Sita's single-minded
 consecration to Rama. 36

Like a frightened fawn, like lotus covered
 by frost: such is Sita's plight!
 What can be done now for retrieving her
 has to be debated on." 37

The moving speech that recalled in detail,
 both his heroic actions
 and the sad plight of Sita in the Grove,
 provoked Angada to plead: 38

"Comrades, since we now know how matters stand,
 it would hardly be proper
 for us to advance to Rama's presence,
 unless we have Sita too. 39

Singly has Anjaneya made his mark
in Lanka: let's now finish
the job under Jambavan's lead, and take
Sita with us to Rama." 40

Intervening, Jambavan told the Prince
that what he was suggesting
would exceed Rama's commission — to find
Sita, not to bring her back. 41

Rama wouldn't like, said Jambavan, Sita's
retrieval to be achieved
by another than himself: 'twas wisdom
to respect Rama's resolve. 42

The Vanaras endorsed the suggestion
for return to Kishkindha,
and buoyed up by the happy consensus
prepared for the homeward flight. 43

All had the one ecstatic wish to tell
the great news to Raghava,
and all were ready for war to help him
fight Ravana and worst him. 44

Like mountain-fragments shot into the air,
like wind-driven cloud-clusters,
the Vanara speed-fiends in orderly
sequence flew across the sky. 45

On the way they halted at Nandana,
Sugriva's famed Honey Grove,
and honey-hued themselves, they felt tempted
and sought leave of Angada. 46

The exuberance was universal,
and the license to indulge
made the Vanaras lose all self-control,
and many gambolled and danced. 47

Such indeed was their intoxication
that they grew wild and naughty
when the caretaker, Dadimukha, tried
to restrain the revellers. 48

Hastening in despair to Sugriva,
Dadimukha made report
of the havoc caused in the Honey Grove
by the drunken Vanaras. 49

But the King read the intended message:
 the unseemly excitement
 only meant the success of the mission —
 Hanuman had found Sita! 50

Now Dadimukha flew back to the Grove
 and informed the now sobered
 Vanaras that Sugriva awaited
 their expeditious return. 51

Happy and proud because of Hanuman's
 unique feat, the flying hosts
 as they neared Kishkindha made noises like
 'kila, kila' in their joy. 52

Noticing Angada's advancing front
 from a distance, Sugriva
 savoured success, and turning to Rama
 spoke words of soothing import: 53

"Take heart, for auspicious news approaches;
 Sita has been discovered;
 were it otherwise, they wouldn't come with such
 a show of jubilation. 54

O Rama, noble son of Kausalya,
 Maruti alone, none else,
 could have accomplished this difficult task,
 for he has wisdom, courage, 55

will, capacity, skill in works — and this
 conjunction of qualities
 is native to him, like light to the Sun:
 cast aside all affliction! 56

An expedition led by Angada,
 counselled by Jambavan, and
 executed in all exactitude
 by Hanuman cannot fail." 57

Now the enthralled Vanara warriors,
 their bright faces reflecting
 their inner fulfilment, stepped on the ground
 near Rañva and Sugriva; 58

and making his obeisance, Hanuman
 spoke the ringing words, "Sita,
 chaste and holy and inviolable,
 Sita has been seen by me!" 59

While Lakshmana beamed with joy and cast on
 Sugriva a grateful look,
 Rama turned with love to the Wind-God's son
 and exuded calm delight. 60

In their excess of enthusiasm,
 for a while the Vanaras
 spoke all at the same time of Maithili's
 travail mid the ogresses: 61

of her total absorption in Rama,
 of the cruel time-limit
 imposed by Ravana, of her patient
 askesis of sufferance. 62

When Rama, feeling immensely relieved,
 asked for a fuller report,
 the Vanaras nodded to Hanuman
 the master of correct speech. 63

After a silent inner obeisance
 to Sita, Maruti gave
 in all its tense circumstantial detail
 the story of his mission: 64

the flight to Lanka, the vain search followed
 by the leap into the Grove,
 the finding of the chaste and fair Sita
 cast among the ogresses; 65

how he won her confidence by hymning
 the tale of Rama's exile;
 how she felt relieved hearing of the pact
 with the mighty Sugriva; 66

and how, for a token, she had given
 her marvellous crest-jewel,
 and for another, she had vividly
 recalled the crow episode; 67

and having accurately reproduced
 the Kakasura story,
 Maruti concluded his narrative
 citing Sita's own message: 68

"One more token: once in the woods, when my
tilak had come off, you touched
 my forehead with a rock's mineral dust
 and made the red mark anew. 69

I'll suffer this life only for the rest
 of the grace-time given me:
 and beyond that, I'll not consent to breathe
 amidst these foul Rakshasas!" 70

These are Sita's words: and now, Raghava,
 all that's needed has been said.
 What remains is to mobilise our arms
 and build a bridge to Lanka." 71

Hanuman's touching tale of his sojourn
 to Lanka, the sight and feel
 of Sita's crest-jewel, and her melting
 message meant anguish and tears, 72

and Rama turned to the King: "A calf makes
 a cow's udders fill with milk;
 so too my heart is charged with emotion
 seeing this best of jewels. 73

'Twas Janaka gave it to Maithili
 at the time of our wedding,
 and worn by her it gave her added grace —
 I think I see her again! 74

Alas, what can cause greater pain to me
 than the sight of this rare Pearl
 found in water and worn on Sita's head,
 but now torn away from her! 75

Sita will tolerate her misery-
 for a while longer, no more;
 and now that we know the worst, let's take steps
 to reclaim Sita in time." 76

The thought of Sita being terrorised
 by taunts and threats, and living
 in dread in an alien atmosphere
 was a stab of shame and pain, 77

and Rama once again asked Hanuman
 to describe Vaidehi's frame
 of mind, and whether her bright face hadn't paled
 like the cloud-shaded full Moon. 78

In the course of his reply, Hanuman
 referred to his spontaneous
 offer to carry Sita and reach her
 to her dear Rama at once: 79

“But the divine Maithili only said
 she couldn’t by herself touch me;
 with Ravana, she was forced, she was dazed,
 helpless—and what could she do? 80

And she added: ‘You should promptly go back,
 worthy Vanara, counsel
 Rama, help him to destroy Ravana,
 and then take me back with him.’ 81

I promised Sita that, brave like tigers,
 you would come with Lakshmana
 aided by the Vanara hosts with claws
 and teeth for their deadly arms; 82

and I told her: ‘You’ll see Rama, having
 destroyed his enemy and
 completed his forest-life, speed you back
 to be crowned in Ayodhya!’ 83

With my parting words of well-reasoned hope
 concerning coming events,
 Maithili saw the end of her despair
 and felt the descent of peace.” 84

In his infinite gratitude, Rama
 held Hanuman in a close
 embrace, for nothing could be as priceless
 as the gift of his own self. 85

An exemplary envoy, Maruti
 had carried out Sugriva’s
 commission, and improved on it as well
 in a significant way. 86

The pressing next question, of course, remained.
 the quick mobilisation
 of the Vanara hosts, and their crossing
 the sea and reaching Lanka. 87

Sugriva on his part assured Rama
 that the Vanara army,
 comprising tested warriors, would prove
 quite war-worthy when tested. 88

Hanuman then gave a measured account
 of the lay-out of Lanka,
 its citadels, ramparts, moats, draw-bridges
 and network of defences. 89

Hanuman spoke too — though in a low key —
 about his own involvement;
 and certainly the Vanara heroes
 would surpass the Rakshasas. 90

Feeling relieved, Rama gave directions
 for Sugriva's mobilised
 power to proceed southward, with Nila
 as the Commander-in-Chief: 91

and Gaya, Gavaya and Gavaksha,
 Angada and Jambavan,
 and Rama, Lakshmana and Sugriva,
 all had their respective roles. 92

Hanuman, as the link between Rama
 and Sugriva, and between
 Kishkindha and Lanka, was verily
 the mind and heart of the whole. 93

And so the mighty Vanara army,
 like a broad river in spate,
 massed and heaved and moved majestically
 and raced towards the far South. 94

As Lakshmana noticed, divers omens —
 the cool breeze, the birds cooing,
 the happy disposition of the stars —
 conveyed their robust message. 95

The splendid army, as it swept southward,
 kept clear of cities, and marched
 with order as well as speed, and crossed hills
 and rivers with equal ease. 96

When they reached Mahendra at last, Rama
 surveyed on one side the sea
 and on the other the nobly arrayed
 sea of Vanaras and Bears. 97

Quartered in the woodland near the seashore,
 the excited army viewed
 the sea and its manifold denizens
 with delight, wonder and awe. 98

Yet once more for a while Rama gave vent
 to melancholy musing
 about Maithili's sad and wasted months
 in Ravana's custody 99

“Ah Lakshmana,” he wailed in his anguish,
“when shall I destroy my foes,
rescue my beloved, and set my eyes
upon dear Sita again?”

100

Saumitri, however, offered solace
and all reasoned grounds of hope,
and presently the Sun set, and darkness
and sleep blanketed the Camp

101

Canto 45: Vibhishana

And meanwhile, across the sea in Lanka,
a tense dramatic sequence
was pitilessly unfolding itself
answering the jerks of fate. 102

After Hanuman's tonic intrusion
into her insulation
near the Simsupa in Asoka Grove,
Sita was a changed woman. 103

The outer circumstances were the same
yet wore a different hue:
even the despicable wardresses
behaved less odiously. 104

Time still seemed to crawl at a petty pace
while Maithili held herself
in patience feeling caged in penumbra,
swaying between hope and fear. 105

And just when she was about to acquiesce
in the flow-tide of despair,
her dear friends, Anala and Trijata,
brought the most astounding news. 106

Hanuman's recent explosive visit
had clearly thrown Ravana
into discomfiture, and he well knew
that worse, much worse, was to come. 107

The escaped Hanuman would explain all
to the aggrieved Raghava,
who must soon, with Sugriva's Vanaras,
invade Lanka in sheer strength. 108

Reacting half in fear and half in rage,
the King had called a conclave
of his close advisers the previous day
for a free exchange of views. 109

But Ravana's domineering presence
had rather inhibited
discussion, and Vibhishana alone
had struck a discordant note 110

Commenting on the conclave, Anala
 said with withering contempt
 that slaves and sycophants acted alike
 in a time of fair weather. 111

After Ravana had spoken, stressing
 the peril from overseas,
 citing Hanuman's phenomenal feats
 and the potential behind, 112

the brazen toadies but cried with one voice:
 "O King, you're invincible;
 why, then, all this anxiety concerning
 a mob of monkeys and bears?" 113

Prahasta, Durmukha, Vajradhamshttra
 made comparable noises,
 while Vajrahanu had boasted he would
 swallow all the Vanaras. 114

Vibhishana alone had, in the name
 of Dharma, strongly pleaded
 for amity and peace, and the return
 of Maithili to her Lord. 115

"Where were these brave fire-eating warriors"
 he asked, "when that Vanara
 went about rampaging in our Lanka
 setting the City on fire? 116

What did Durmukha and Prahasta do?
 or Vajradhamshttra either?
 And was Vajrahanu not hungry then,
 since he didn't eat up the ape? 117

Not one now, but tens of thousands of them,
 so many fierce Hanumans,
 are camping on the shore beyond the sea:
 prudence pleads for peace, not war." 118

The King then brusquely dismissed the conclave,
 but Vibhishana, after
 a night's inner debate, wished to renew
 his high-powered plea for peace. 119

The strong ties of kinship and loyalty
 to Lanka's King on one side,
 the categorical imperatives
 of Dharma on the other: 120

thus see-sawing between the opposites
 the hours had exhausted him,
 but he knew at last that the lower law
 must give place to the higher. 121

And when the dawn brightened the East at last,
 his mind finally made up,
 Vibhishana rushed to the King's presence
 and pictured poor Lanka's plight: 122

"Since you brought Vaidehi here, the evil
 omens are multiplying:
 the sacred fire won't burn, and ants are found
 in our choicest oblations. 123

Cows fail to give milk, horses are listless,
 mules, asses, camels shudder,
 the menacing vultures hover above,
 and jackals howl viciously." 124

It was in this awesome predicament
 that Ravana's word went round
 that he would hold the Council this morning
 and have the issue opened. 125

"A well-attended meeting," Anala
 continued; "Stalwarts, elders,
 Ministers, close relations, were all there
 in humped anticipation. 126

Even Kumbhakarna had come, awake
 after a long spell of sleep;
 and governed by his stern sense of duty,
 my dear father was there too. 127

The Hall was worthy of the occasion,
 one of Visvakarma's feats;
 and some councillors carried maces, clubs,
 javelins, spears and hatchets. 128

Addressing Kumbhakarna pointedly,
 Ravana spoke of Sita,
 of his mighty infatuation for her,
 and of Rama's enmity. 129

He also recalled the incredible
 exploits of the lone monkey,
 Rama's envoy, and what might be in store
 for Lanka in the future. 130

Hearing this now for the first time, the great
 slumberer, Kumbhakarna, .
 charged Ravana with seeking their counsel
 when 'twas already too late. 131

Had he consulted them before he planned
 the abduction of Sita,
 that would have been proper, but now remained
 nothing but fighting the foe. 132

Mahapārsva intervened and advanced
 the sniggering suggestion
 that the King should possess Sita by force
 and end the uncertainty. 133

Now out came the high fantastical truth:
 he had once disrobed and forced
 Punjikasthali, Brahma's grand-daughter,
 and brought this curse on himself. 134

Should Ravana ever try his brute strength
 on an unwilling woman,
 that very moment his head would splinter
 into a thousand fragments! 135

So, then, Maithili, 'tis this mortal fear
 that has so far saved the King
 from succumbing to the last temptation
 and inviting instant death. 136

Once more it was my father's turn to speak,
 and first he castigated
 the lewd and cynical Mahaparsva
 for his time-serving advice; 137

then he spoke of Rama's great skill in arms,
 and lastly, in Lanka's name,
 urged the Council to advise Ravana
 to opt for the path of peace. 138

And, as if in answer to Ravana's
 false sense of security
 with the boons he had secured from Brahma,
 'my father made bold to say: 139

'My King, my elder brother, my father:
 my duty makes me speak out
 and utter a grave warning, since mortal
 danger lies in wait for you. 140

It's the secret of all god-given boons,
 when Asura, Rakshasa
 or any other wrests them from Above
 by power of *tapasya*: 141

that the boons lull the ear with assurance
 while waiting to break the heart!
 Let me cite in illustration the fate
 of Hiranyakasipu. 142

An Asuric colossus, his *tapas*
 had won for him a package
 of boons granting immunity from death
 by day or night, beast or man. 143

When later the issue was joined between
 Hiranya and Prahlada
 his son who worshipped Vishnu and not his
 own father as the true God: 144

after an orgy of persecutions
 that left Prahlada immune,
 the blasphemous tyrant provoked at last
 the Man-Lion avatar; 145

and this neither-Man-nor-Beast made short work
 of Hiranya in the hour
 between day and night, aye on the threshold
 that was neither "in" nor "out"! 146

There's this lesson to be learnt, O great King;
 the Man-Lion, then; and now
 Rama, the puissant Man: and your boons don't
 cover death by hand of Man. 147

'Twas not Hanuman's muscle but the fire
 of the imprisoned Sita's
 chastity that destroyed half of Lanka;
 'twould be wise to return her. 148

This roused the wrath of youthful Indrajit
 who dared to charge my father
 with cowardice, and boasted of his own
 matchless prowess and powers. 149

Stung to the quick, Vibhishana hit back
 and called Indrajit a boy
 without judgement, a cruel, conceited,
 wayward and wicked creature. 150

This struck predictable fire in the King
 who branded Vibhishana
 the scheming enemy within, the false
 friend, the family's disgrace. 151

In his turn, my father accused the King
 of *adharma*, and declared
 he would withdraw from Lanka, since his words
 of Truth displeased his brother. 152

Thus fire drew forth fire, and my sad father
 with four loyal supporters
 left the Council Hall — and Lanka as well —
 and flew in quest of Rama. 153

I knew father's mind: these last few weeks since
 the Vanara made havoc
 in Lanka and returned unscathed, something
 had been pressing upon him; 154

strange his behaviour, sometimes talking
 to himself or muttering
 the name 'Rama', or seemingly balanced
 for some decisive action. 155

I've seen him tense at times, as if under
 the weight of some compulsion
 that he neither knew how to bear with ease
 nor how best to wish away. 156

Clearly he was caught in the interim
 between the seminal thought
 and the irretrievable key-action
 on which so much would depend! 157

A battle of loyalties, and the heart
 rocked by an insurrection
 with the issue fatefully joined between
 the devil and the Divine! 158

Dear Sita, we're being overtaken
 by events we're unable
 to comprehend: like puppets we're playing
 our parts, — who knows to what end? 159

I was in the Council Hall observing
 the actors in the drama:
 and in a sudden but startling moment
 'twas as though the masks were gone; 160

and there was neither King nor courtier,
 I saw not father, uncles,
 cousins, kinsmen, Lanka's citizenry, —
 only the Spectre of Doom! 161

I don't know, perhaps I'm imagining
 things, perhaps it's the outcome
 of father's precipitate withdrawal
 from god-forsaken Lanka; 162

but something tells me we're on the threshold
 of stupendous happenings,
 and all we can do is to tune ourselves
 to endurance, hope and faith. 163

And Sita, I heard it being bruited
 about in the corridors
 that Rama's unimaginably vast
 army of bears and monkeys, — 164

think of it: thousands, hundreds of thousands
 of menacing Vanaras,
 all like the incredible Hanuman,
 quartered just across the sea! 165

My feeling is that father and his four
 gallant lieutenants have made
 for the northern shore to seek audience
 of Rama and Sugriva. 166

What a wrench it must have been for them all
 to leave home and family,
 friends, relations and the familiar scenes,
 and leap into the Unknown! 167

But Sita, one must hold tight, however
 ambiguous the currents,
 for surely some unseen Omnipotence
 is subtly shaping our ends." 168

A brief silence descended upon them
 of a piece with the twilight
 truce hour between late evening and the night
 with its imponderables. 169

Slowly the separate identities
 felt drawn into a mystic
 communion, and yet the three companions
 retained their different selves. 170

Anala was feeling half-exhausted
 by her non-stop recital
 of the forenoon drama of flattery
 first, then decisive dissent. 171

Maithili felt her pulse quicken somewhat
 thinking of Vibhishana's
 definitive act of affirmation,
 and his flight to Rama's Camp. 172

As for Trijata, when Anala's words
 sank into her consciousness,
 she seemed to lapse into a sort of trance,
 then her eyes opened, she saw! 173

"I see, I see," she cried as though a flash
 had thrown to her sudden gaze
 a Vision, a revelation splendid,
 and all else was blotted out; 174

oh flash upon flash, with brief intervals,
 and the tense divine drama
 seemed to be enacted in no more than
 a few memorable scenes: 175

"Ah, I see my noble father again
 armed as befits his station,
 poised in mid-air surrounded by his four,
 and all about to descend. 176

A black-out, and another tearing flash:
 they've landed, and now confront
 suspicious Sugriva, for he takes them
 for Ravana's scheming spies. 177

Again the golden flash, the rich tableau:
 Sugriva speaks to Rama—
 wonder of wonders, now I can both see
 and hear the protagonists. 178

Splendorous is Rama's divine image,
 and by his side, Lakshmana's:
 the same I had seen in my dream some weeks
 ago here in Asoka! 179

Once in my younger days, Sita, I had
 journeyed towards Himavant
 along with several fellow-pilgrims,
 and halted in Ayodhya. 180

Late in the evening we went to the shrine
 of the all-compassionate
 and munificent Madhavi, Mother
 Goddess of life, love and light. 181

That was when I first saw you, Maithili,
 with Rama and Lakshmana:
 you had come unattended by a guard
 with no care for protocol. 182

It was soon after your marriage, Sita,
 and the glow of holiness,
 trebled with morning freshness and beauty,
 cast a mighty spell on me. 183

This was how, almost fifteen years after,
 when I saw you here under
 such tragically changed circumstances,
 I had the shock of my life. 184

This was how again, when I had my dream —
 that contrapuntal sequence —
 I could at once figure out the faces
 and fortunes of the Brothers. 185

Ah the light clears, now I see the great soul:
 he is all rapt attention
 when Sugriva, Hanuman and others
 set forth their respective views. 186

All but Hanuman see Vibhishana
 as a spy, a deceitful
 Rakshasa to be quarantined, tested,
 and even killed if need be. 187

Only Hanuman rises well above
 all the varied tiers and coils
 of stock responses and first impressions,
 and recommends asylum. 188

But mark — oh how can I describe the grace,
 the glory on Rama's face:
 he has heard all, weighed all, and in the calm
 lucidity of his soul, 189

and as if dispensing a verity
 eternal, self-evident,
 he now enunciates the all-sufficing
 Law of Surrender and Grace: 190

'It's not my nature to reject any
who comes to me offering .
his friendship, although he may secretly
be harbouring some evil.' 191

Rama cites the seminal example
of the bereaved dove, whose spouse
a woodman had killed, feeding with its flesh
the guilty hunter himself! 192

'If a frail bird, and one bereaved as well,
did once save its guilt-laden
suppliant, how can Rama of the famed
race of the Raghus do less? 193

The categorical imperative
of Rishi Kandu ordains
the giving of asylum, should even
a foe seek one's protection. 194

With my firm adhesion to Kandu's Law,
I must needs grant asylum,
regardless of his background, to one who
supplicates saying *I'm thine!*' 195

After this burst of Sunrise, Sugriva
and the doubters are convinced;
and I see my anxious Sire being led
before the divine Presence. 196

I see my father with his loyal four
at resplendent Rama's feet
and hear the throbbing words: 'I've left Lanka
behind: I'm now thine alone.' 197

And Rama says: 'Welcome Vibhishana
as yet another brother,
the seventh, after we four Kakutsthas,
and Guha and Sugriva.' 198

What a moment of transfiguration:
don't I see the gentle rain
of Rama's Grace meeting the ardent fires
'rising from the supplicants?' 199

This was perhaps too overpowering
for the psychic Trijata,
for she collapsed into Maithili's arms
as though feeling exhausted. 200

Sita exchanged significant glances
 with wide-awake Anala,
and they both felt infinitely grateful
 for the wondrous transmission. 201

When Trijata later opened her eyes,
 she smiled and muttered faintly:
“Have no fear, Sita, now all will be well —
 Grace has taken things in hand.” 202

Canto 47: The War Begins •

- When Anala and Trijata had left
Maithili alone amid
Asoka's mystic silences, broken
now and then by weird noises, 203
- she calmly made a reasoned assessment
of the unfolding future,
and was in a robuster frame of mind
than she could have imagined. 204
- Yet the long hours of the night seemed longer
than the intolerable
hours of day-time waiting, waiting, eating
her heart out in misery. 205
- She sighed, she held speechless conversations
with the friendly Simsaapa,
she idly gazed, as so often before,
at the starry canopy. 206
- Was she lonely, she mused with a wan smile,
when she was truly enringed
by such opulent flora and fauna
and the scintillating sky. 207
- Sometimes she recalled her Mithilan days,
her sessions with the Rishis
when they spoke of plateaus of consciousness —
waking, dreaming and deep sleep. 208
- And, again, of the pulls of the vital,
the gymnastics of the mind,
the see-saw of the desire-self's sparring,
the poise of the witness Self. 209
- In Asoka's surcharged air, Maithili
reviewed the crazy drama
of her life from the vantage castle-seat
of her immaculate Self. 210
- The vicissitudinous lyric-song
struck the variegated notes
of phenomenal life, but the Witness
was the Bass that sustained all. 211

After a prolonged and uneasy stretch
 of Time, Sita grew aware
 once more of the seething life around her
 and the coming of her friends. 212

As if unable to contain herself,
 Anala spoke with gusto:
 "There's so much to tell, Sita, and how fast
 the scenario changes! 213

After Father's defiant departure,
 Ravana was in jitters
 and sent Sardula to meet Sugriva
 with the plausible appeal: 214

'If I stole Maithili, what's that to you,
 O Sugriva? Let's be friends!'
 But Sardula returned empty-handed,
 and damaged in the process. 215

Ravana fumed in his discomfiture,
 and when news came of large-scale
 troop movements near the sea, he sent more spies
 to report on the latest 216

Suka and Sārana hurried back soon
 with the most alarming news.
 'O great King! the tongue falters to describe
 what the eye and ear have learnt. 217

Vibhishana, accepted as ally,
 has been crowned King of Lanka,
 and the Vanara engineers have built
 a broad causeway to this isle. 218

Indeed, Rama's peaceful approach failing,
 he had to threaten a quick
 drying up of the green heaving waters
 before the Sea-God saw sense 219

and agreed to the laying of a dam
 that would connect with Lanka:
 and the construction was master-minded
 by the architect, Nala. 220

Marvellous, O King, is the Vanaras'
 handiwork, the mighty dam
 one hundred Yojanas long laid across
 the sea in only five days. 221

No mean feat for Nala, super-builder,
 and the hordes of supporting
 Vanaras and Bears that brought rocks and trees
 and out of them shaped the dam. 222

And now, O great King, Rama's battalions,
 like the sea's heaving billows,
 have made for our shore, and are well quartered
 in Lanka's vicinity. 223

And Rama sent word through me, O brave King,
 that the assault would begin
 tomorrow, and that might be the tocsin
 for the finish of your reign. 224

The army of the Vanaras, the might
 of Rama and Lakshmana,
 Sugriva and Vibhishana, threaten
 Lanka with decimation. 225

O gallant King, the battle-worthiness
 of the oceanic army
 of the Vanaras makes us plead for peace
 and the return of Sita.' 226

Ravana was, however, like one doomed
 beyond hope of retrieval,
 and only ordered the spies to show him
 who was who among his foes. 227

And so they climed up to the dizziest
 height around, and Sārana
 pointed out with his finger one by one
 the assembled warriors: 228

'That huge Vanara, O King, is Nīla
 the generalissimo:
 the one next to him is Prince Angada,
 the late Vali's puissant son. 229

There, dominant among their followers,
 loom Sveta and Kumuda;
 and see yonder the majestic Chanda,
 Saraba and Panasa. 230

And more and more, O mighty Rakshasa,
 see there the gallant Rambha,
 the massive Vinata and Gavaya,
 and the hoary Jambavan.' 231

It was now Suka's turn, and he guided
 Ravana's attentive gaze
 to the youthful Dvididha and Mainda
 and specially Hanuman: 232

'I don't need, O King of the Rakshasas,
 to recall the arrival
 in Lanka of this incendiary ape
 and the havoc he caused here. 233

And there, there, backgrounded by Hanuman,
 see the sure archer Rama
 flanked by Lakshmana, and the two allies,
 Sugriva, Vibhishana.' 234

It's lucky for me, Sita, I can slip
 in and out of the palace,
 the Council Hall, or this Grove, whenever
 I have a mind to explore. 235

Being of the Royal House, after all,
 no questions are asked, and no
 irksome restraints are placed on my movements
 all this suits me well enough. 236

And thus it was, O Sita, even I
 could catch a glimpse of Rama
 the dark-hued conqueror with lotus eyes,
 and his curly-haired brother." 237

For a while all three were absorbed in thought
 when, as if stung by a wasp,
 Trijata grew visibly excited,
 and her eyes aglow, she cried: 238

"Sita, Sita, beware of Ravana's
 trickeries and treacheries,
 for I smell yet another sorcery
 like that fateful decoy deer." 239

And true enough, there was the unseemly
 bustle of approaching steps,
 the glare of midnight torches, and the loud
 fanfare announcing the King. 240

While Trijata and Anala withdrew
 a little, Ravana fixed
 his maddened eyes on Maithili, and hissed:
 "Here's Rama, killed in battle! 241

The fool! with his motley of apes and bears,
 he dared to invade Lanka:
 when they were asleep at night, my forces
 destroyed them, and Rama too." 242

And Vidyujjihva, magician-adept,
 placed before her the severed
 lifeless head of her beloved Rama
 and his great bow and arrows. 243

It was as though lightning had struck Sita,
 for she collapsed on the ground;
 and Ravana too withdrew in alarm
 on summons from the palace. 244

And the instant Ravana's back was turned,
 Maithili opened her eyes
 and saw the gruesome spectacle vanish
 like the stuff of a nightmare. 245

Advancing from their retreat, Anala
 and Trijata did their best
 to reassure Vaidehi, still shaken
 by sobs, that Rama was safe. 246

The reports of Sardula, Sarana
 and Suka had quite unnerved
 Ravana, and in mad desperation
 he had turned to sorcery. 247

That magician-lackey, Vidyujjihva,
 must have forged the illusion,
 and it became air when the nexus snapped
 and left not a rack behind. 248

Now Sita, having died a thousand deaths
 exposed to the severed head,
 quickly regained the scriptures of her faith,
 and even brought out a smile: 249

"There's something despicably cheap and mean
 in all Ravana's doings:
 he seemed an ascetic, and proved a thief;
 and now, the King's a mere cheat!" 250

They were conversing far into the night
 with Sita wanting to know
 more and still more about the deployment
 of the Vanara army; 251

- Trijata, speaking spasmodically
 about her premonitions
 or projecting in the vividest terms
 her psychic figurations; 252
- and Anala, giving her incisive
 conflation of mere hearsay,
 investigative insights, and private
 explorations and findings: 253
- just then, like a seasonal wind of change,
 there flew right into their midst
 the high-souled Sarama, Vibhishana's
 spouse and Trijata's mother. 254
- "I couldn't wait, Sita," she said, "to send word
 through Anala, for events
 crowd upon one another, and I felt
 I must prepare you at once. 255
- The fiasco of the false severed head
 can only backfire against
 the Rakshasa King who has proved himself
 a fool, not alone a knave. 256
- While there is no dearth of consultations,
 he has chosen to ignore
 the warnings of his mother, Kaikasi,
 and the statesman, Avindhya. 257
- 'Was it not enough,' they asked, 'that Rama
 destroyed Khara, Dushana,
 and the fourteen thousand? that Hanuman
 screamed havoc over Lanka?' 258
- But his well-wishers and the elders know
 that he's not to be deterred
 from his chosen path of self-destruction
 by fright or friendly counsel. 259
- Reacting to the reverberating
 war cries from the Vanara
 army, Ravana called at short notice
 a meeting of his Council. 260
- There I heard the revered Malayavan,
 Ravana's mother's uncle,
 recommend in the interests of all
 a course of conciliation: 261

'Sita has now become your obsession,
Ravana, and this threatens
all Lanka; and your way of adharma
can but end in dusty death.

I see with dismay portents of evil:
clouds rumble menacingly,
beasts and birds of prey howl and screech and scream,
women see morbid spectres;

the wildest abominations occur,
and Death and Doom are abroad,
O Rayana, make haste, return Sita
and reach concord with Rama.' 264

But Ravana scoffs at reason, prudence,
fairness and seasoned counsel
when they go against his desire-self's pulls
or governing obsessions. 265

Those that don't blindly follow him, he feels,
must be counted enemies;
and in his extreme egoism he will
rather break in two than bend.

And so he glared at sad Malayavan,
fumed against the peace-mongers
and declared that nothing would induce him
to surrender Maithili.

He also gave orders for deploying
his armies and their Generals
at the four gates of Lanka, and even
the impregnable Centre: 268

Prahasta for the East, Mahaparsva
for the South, Virupaksha
for the Centre, Indrajit for the West
and Ravana for the North.

But Sita, take heart, for the other side
is valiant and alert.
Vibhishana's four have reconnoitered
and made report to Rama.

I have links with my father's ministers
who come and go as they like
disguised diversely for mobility
or invisibility. 271

Told of the strategic distribution
 of Ravana's regiments,
 Raghava has ordered point-counterpoint
 mighty matching assignments: 272

Nilā against Prahasta in the East;
 Angada at the Southern,
 and Hanuman, the Western gate; Rama
 and Saumitri, the Northern; 273

Sugriva, Vibhishana, Jambavan,
 the three doughty warriors,
 would reinforce the rest from a central
 and commanding position. 274

Oh Sita, there's more to tell, for marvels
 never seem to cease, even
 in this world of violent Rakshasas
 and volatile Vanaras. 275

From the heights of the Suvala mountain
 where all had congregated,
 my father was pointing with his finger
 at the landmarks of Lanka. 276

It was quite an exhilarating sight,
 and when their gaze fell at last
 on regal Ravana on a tower
 surveying all before him, 277

looming large and louring like a dark cloud,
 that bejewelled and evil
 figure resplendent with strong sandal paste
 stung Sugriva to fury, 278

and he flew with lightning speed to Lanka
 and dared the dazed Ravana,
 and the impetuous antagonists
 tried to worst one another. 279

Then, being equally matched, Sugriva
 drew even with Ravana
 and arrow-like darted back to Rama,
 and made obeisance to him. 280

Feeling relieved Raghava applauded
 the Vanara King's valour,
 but warned him also against similar
 erratic indiscretions. 281

Now Raghava viewed with satisfaction
the army dispositions
and sent Angada on a last-minute
mission of peace to Lanka. 282

With alacrity Prince Angada sped
like the God of Fire himself,
and confronting the King with defiance
delivered Rama's message: 283

'O Ravana caged in the illusion
of invincibility:
repent, surrender Maithili, and live
or else prepare to perish.' 284

But Ravana's impulsive directive
that the envoy should be killed
provoked the Prince to pull down the Palace
Crest, and fly back to Rama. 285

And Sita, that's the ominous posture
of affairs at the moment,
and the issue will soon be joined between
Rama and the Rakshasa." 286

There was a brief spell of solemn silence
that held the infinities,
and Sita heaved an agonising sigh
of trembling incertitude. 287

Registering the anguish and heart-ache
that seemed to rock Maithili,
Trijata came out with the soothing words
surging from her psychic depths: 288

"Sita, there's no need for apprehension
of any kind: the air speaks
fair to my soul's profounder listening,
and the dark but hides the dawn. 289

Rival omens with contradictory
intimations fill the air:
here in Lanka, prospective tragedy
but for Rama, life and joy. 290

I've seen the veterans seized with sudden
terror as they view the vast
Vanara battalions fill all the space
between Lanka and the sea. 291

I've heard some bemoan the imminent fate
 of the Lanka they had loved,
 and others in desperation prepare
 for the fated holocaust. 292

I know well enough the tyrannous strength
 of Lanka's Asuric might,
 the result of o'erweening ambition
 and determined askesis. 293

But unless when auspiciously endowed
 (as my Father seems to be),
 the Rakshasa's vicious mole of nature
 renders him morally blind. 294

And that is how, for all the rake's progress
 the Rakshasa registers,
 the terminal total is mere defeat,
 a crumbling of the Tower 295

We'll now leave you, Sita, and lose ourselves
 in our separate circuits
 and preoccupations, but all the time
 keep open our eyes and ears. 296

You may be sure that we two, and mother
 Sarama also, will act
 in concert to advance your holy cause
 in all practicable ways." 297

Canto 48: Alternating Fortunes

- The sisters left, and Sita was once more
 wrapped up in her silences
that gathered all Space and Time dimensions
 into the reigning moment. 298
- Living and dying and reborn once more,
 tossed between the termini
of the Raghava and Ravana worlds,
 Sita transcended her plight. 299
- She was as one safely insulated
 from the enmities raging
around Lanka's four impregnable gates
 and the Rakshasa strongholds. 300
- For Sita, it was as though Time stood still,
 a becalmed sea of silence
and nothingness, yet now and then varied
 by ripples of disturbance. 301
- What was that ear-splitting detonation?
 The Rakshasa deploying
his powered trident? or the Vanara
 uprooting a hill or tree? 302
- The distant tremors of the engagement
 invaded her consciousness
like a harrowing nightmare in progress;
 and Sita shuddered at times. 303
- Her waking eyes saw not the rhythmic beats
 of the developing strife,
yet she didn't miss the language of the heart,
 nor Nature's intimations. 304
- Deep in her being she sensed the heart-aches
 of the unfolding conflict,
the groans of defeat, the screams of triumph,
 the dark and the shrouded Dawn! 305
- Her sensibility thus suspended
 between faith and hopelessness,
each second seemed unending, but the day
 sped like Rama's own arrow. 306

The sinister Rakshasi wardresses
 scurried at a safe distance,
 and whatever the news from the war-front
 they remained sphinx-like, silent. 307

There was an intrusive stir in the air
 like a giant bird's winging
 towards the earth, and as Sita looked up
 she saw Pushpaka descend. 308

Now as she sat humped in self-awareness
 and stanced as if for prayer,
 Trijata stepped down from the big air-car
 with an inscrutable look 309

The prophetess lost no time to transmit
 a speechless urgent message
 signifying that mere appearances
 could mislead the unwary. 310

Then she persuaded Maithili to fly
 with her to the battlefield,
 where they saw stretched on the ground the lifeless
 Raghava and Lakshmana. 311

Sita felt a chill o'erpower her heart,
 and while she turned in despair
 to Trijata, one of the ogresses
 yelled: "See, see, Rama is dead!" 312

Another crowed: "Sita, see for yourself,
 the Vanaras are done for,
 gallant Indrajit has achieved wonders,
 and killed the Royal Brothers. 313

The soul-searing spectacle of Rama
 and Saumitri on their bed
 of inert arrows and broken armours
 half unhinged Maithili's mind 314

"Is this gross indecent whimper the end?"
 she bewailed; "Didn't soothsayers
 predict auspiciousness as my birthmark?
 why, then, this deprivation? 315

They said that the lotus-marks on my feet
 proclaimed me regal consort
 of a reigning Prince, that my whole being
 repelled the inauspicious. 316

Even now, dazed and maddened as I am,
 I feel foreign to foulness, •
 my heart's immaculate Fire seems to scare
 all unblestness away. 317

The wise of Mithila and Ayodhya
 saw in me the exemplum
 of all things fair, holy and auspicious,
 the Pure Bride of Wedded Love. 318

Yet there I see Rama's recumbent form
 and of dear Urmila's Lord,
 Saumitri, adepts in the art of war
 and fighters unparalleled. 319

What marvels they did at Janasthana,
 how uncanny their release
 of the potent Agni, Indra, Vayu
 and Brahma *mantric* missiles? 320

Where was the foe brave enough to confront
 my wondrous archer Rama,
 and now alas! he lies low on the field:
 how can Kausalya bear this? 321

Moved by Maithili's heart-rending lament,
 Trijata cast an intent
 look at the inert forms, and springing up
 with a new light in her eyes, 322

she held Sita in a protective clasp
 and spoke soothing healing words:
 "Fear not, O incarnate auspiciousness!
 Rama and Lakshmana live: 323

it's some transient swoon of the senses
 that has o'ertaken Rama
 and Saumitri; their angelic faces
 yet retain their native hue, 324

the Vanara army remains deployed
 in all its orderliness,
 and nor panic nor incertitude mars
 the deportment of the troops. 325

And remember this too, O Vaidehi:
 this heavenly Pushpaka
 could not have conveyed you here were it not
 that you remained unwidowed. 326

I can see in your exemplary form
 all the distinguishing marks
 of bridal blessedness, the perfectly
 fashioned ensemble of limbs: 327

black tresses long and lustrous, fair eyebrows
 that don't meet, well-matched fingers,
 breasts pressed close together, strength in softness
 and a golden complexion. 328

Fear not, Vaidehi: your Lord is alive,
 and Saumitri is alive;
 after this necessary swoon, they'll rise
 once more like the morning Sun." 329

The greatly relieved Maithili replied,
 her hands joined in thankfulness:
 "Trijata, may your words come true indeed."
 And they flew back to the Grove. 330

Returning to the Simsupa's shelter,
 Sita's silent questioning
 forced a tentative explanation from
 the still confused Trijata: 331

"Sometimes, Sita, we should let the heart speak
 and silence the active mind
 with its chilling dialectics of doubt
 and smothering of the soul. 332

Past midnight, the King peremptorily
 called me and ordered I should
 fly you to the battlefield and show you
 the exposed Rama's body. 333

There was a catch somewhere, I thought, and from
 my psychic centre I had
 reassurance of Rama's well-being,
 and I came post-haste to you. 334

For all his vaunted might, the Rakshasa
 will not refrain from lying,
 deceit and so cery to gain his ends,
 and he scoffs at Truth and Grace. 335

I've no doubt, Sita— believe me, my heart
 cannot lie!— this Indrajit,
 skilled in sorcery, ha. done some mischief
 which will disappear like mist. 336

For the nonce let's hold ourselves in patience,
 and prayer, and passiveness:
 I expect, mother Sarama knows all
 and will send Anala soon." 337

And some hours hence when 'twas clear day once more,
 Anala came with her load
 of auspicious news, dispelling the clouds
 that weighed down on Maithili. 338

"Holy Sita, all is well with Rama,"
 said Anala; "all is well
 with Lakshmana, and all's prospering well
 with the Vanara army." 339

Having at once set Sita's mind at ease,
 the messenger continued:
 "Angada's mission of peace having failed,
 Rama had to opt for war. 340

While all the space between Lanka's ramparts
 and the encompassing sea
 was a heaving mass of the Vanara
 forces itching for a fight, 341

Rama as he viewed the besieged Lanka
 with its gloried opulence
 thought of the woes of the fawn-eyed Sita,
 and 'twas a spur to action. 342

Forthwith he ordered a total assault
 on the four-gated Lanka
 with its doughty Rakshasa defenders,
 and the Vanaras obeyed. 343

Tree-trunks and hill-crests were the armaments,
 their doubled fists the trigger,
 gates, moats, ramparts, turrets were the targets,
 and 'Rama!' the battle-cry. 344

And spearheading the opening attack,
 Sugriva, Vibhishana,
 Sushena, Lakshmana, Rama himself
 unleashed a spate of terror. 345

Provoked by the cumulative impact
 of the Vanara onslaught,
 Ravana in an access of fury
 decreed swift counter-attacks. 346

While the rival forces clashed with fury
 in sanguinary battle,
 sundry stalwarts engaged in single fights
 and sought high renown or death 347

Angada fought Indrajit, Mainda killed
 with his fist Vajramushti,
 Sugriva slew Praghasa with a tree,
 Rama attacked four at once. 348

Night came, but brought no respite to any,
 Vanara and Rakshasa
 mistook friends for foes, hit out at shadows
 and rampaged in all quarters. 349

Amid all that confusion and tumult,
 Rama and Lakshmana made
 unerring hits with an uncanny aim
 and laid low the Rakshasas. 350

While Rama's devastating attacks caused
 blood to flow in gushing streams
 and the corpses of the fallen fighters
 all lay scattered on the field, 351

Angada struck boldly at Indrajit,
 destroyed his mount and drove him
 to flee from the scene, albeit determined
 on definitive revenge. 352

Both Sugriva and Vibhishana praised
 Vali's son for his rare feat,
 but Rama sensed sinister sequences
 and cautioned the Vanaras. 353

And bearing out Rama's fears as it were,
 Indrajit returned and rained
 from an invisible vantage station
 a shower of sharp arrows. 354

Albeit invincible in open war,
 the Brothers felt paralysed
 by Indrajit's gimmicks that caused panic
 among the Vanara hosts. 355

And presently Indrajit with sure aim
 and diabolic intent
 aimed the fell serpent-darts at the Princes
 and struck them down unconscious. 356

Sudden demoralisation now swept
 across the Vanara lines,
 and many felt sore and dissipated,
 and concluded all was lost. 357

But buoyed up by his success, Indrajit
 rushed to his worried Father
 and reported the enemy's collapse
 and the death of the Brothers. 358

It was then, Sita, the King commanded
 Trijata to make you see
 the sad spectacle of defeat and death
 on the Lanka battlefield. 359

In his elation, Ravana decreed
 rejoicings in the City,
 and there were flags and illuminations
 and noisy celebrations. 360

Meanwhile there was dole on the other side
 till Vibhishana told them
 it was but the slumber of consciousness
 imposed by Indrajit's spell. 361

The first to wake up from the daze, Rama
 grew aware of Lakshmana
 and the plight of the Vanara army
 and spoke in defeatist terms. 362

Sushena suggested that Hanuman
 should bring certain wondrous herbs
 from afar for healing the wounds at once
 and restoring health to all. 363

Just then the golden eagle, Garuda,
 appeared as if from nowhere,
 and the serpent-darts lost their potency,
 and robust life smiled again. 364

Garuda the eternal enemy
 of the whole tribe of serpents
 had thus, in no more than a split-second,
 transformed the Vanara scene. 365

When Garuda withdrew after paying
 due obeisance to Rama,
 the Vanaras gave vent to their great joy
 and were ready for action. 366

With the beating of drum and the blowing
of conches, the Vanaras
showed their renewed appetite for battle,
and made a terrific din. 367

And as the lusty Vanara war-cries
resounded in Ravana's
Lanka, a cold fear seized the Rakshasas,
and they prepared for the worst. 368

After his brief elation, Ravana
was in the doldrums again,
for his spies told him of an offensive
being mounted against him. 369

Resisting the gloom that invaded him,
Ravana issued the call
that the divers gates should be defended
from the Vanara onslaughts 370

And Dhumraksha is assigned to the west,
and war-worthy Rakshasas,
unmindful of the menacing omens,
are pouring out of Lanka. 371

Well, Sita, this in brief is my story,
and I know the road is long,
Indrajit may try more of his magic,
but Truth will prevail at last." 372

Sita heard and said simply: "Anala,
this waiting is horrible;
but since impatience is the worst of sins,
let me hold on to my faith." 373

Left alone once more to herself, Sita
became an easy victim
to excruciating sharp needless of thought
and suffered cancerous pain. 374

All war meant the mutual infliction
of intolerable hurt,
and participants but killed or got killed,
and wounded or received wounds. 375

Rakshasa, Vanara or the human
race. male or female elders
or youngsters: the injured or the guilty:
all are life-inheritors 376

And yet this passion, this spite, this hatred,
 and the million million deaths:
 her woman's heart of compassion rebelled
 against the ethos of war. 377

She then remembered the fake Sannyasin,
 the reckless cheat Ravana,
 his vanities and vainglories of State,
 his mean resort to magic: 378

diverse dialectics tantalised her:
 good and evil; truth, falsehood;
sreyas, ~~preyas~~; compassion, cruelty,
 and Sita felt bewildered. 379

Late in the evening Trijata returned
 to give more news to Sita;
 her face weighted with anxiety, she spoke
 in a pained but steady voice: 380

"No end, Sita, to these vicissitudes,
 to the pitiless see-saw
 between peace and war; and Ravana must
 needs prolong the holocaust! 381

After Hanuman had killed Dhumraksha,
 it was Vajradhamshta's turn
 to face Angada at the southern gate
 and invite Hell on himself. 382

The unwieldy Rakshasa bit the dust
 spreading panic in his ranks,
 but Angada shone mid the Vanaras
 as a puissant conqueror. 383

Ravana, now resigned to reverses,
 sent the brave Akampana
 to fill the breach, but nothing could save him,
 and Hanuman brought him down. 384

Ravana grew more than ever concerned,
 inspected the defences
 and held counsel with gallant Prahasta
 the Generalissimo. 385

'Returning Sita, we could have won peace,'
 he reminded; 'now it's war,
 and I'm ready to fight and cast my life
 as oblation in the Fire.' 386

- Carrying the grim panoply of doom,
 Prahasta and his stalwarts —
 Mahānāda and several others —
 stormed out of the eastern gate, 387
- and undeterred by the tell-tale omens,
 the vulture on the flagstaff,
 the lustreless planets, the rain of fire,
 they challenged the enemy. 388
- Clashing with his Vanara opposite,
 Commander-in-chief Nila,
 Prahasta felt caught in a fierce grapple,
 and fell down lifeless at last. 389
- Stung to fury, Ravana now resolved
 he would himself lead the charge,
 and as he rode out of the northern gate
 he blazed like the brilliant Sun. 390
- From afar, Vibhishana pointed out
 the advancing Ravana
 to Rama and the Vanara heroes;
 and all were struck with wonder. 391
- Such power and presence, and beyond doubt
 a regal fighter; also
 a sinner extraordinary, waiting
 for Rama's avenging stroke! 392
- The sight infuriated Sugriva
 who began the offensive,
 and Nila, Hanuman and Lakshmana
 and Rama too — joined the fray. 393
- Ravana was a veteran indeed
 and knew all the arts of war,
 and worsted Sugriva, dazed Hanuman,
 and cast down Nila himself. 394
- During the bitter engagement between
 Ravana and Lakshmana,
 arrows crossed and neutralised each other,
 and more shafts, and the same fate! 395
- Even the Brahma-dart, which Ravana
 released in desperation,
 but spurred Saumitri to counter-attack;
 and with his great bow broken, 396

the Rakshasa King clasped his javelin
and hurled it at Saumitri;
as it struck him, he reeled uncertainly
and was about to collapse. 397

But before he could be seized as a prize
of war, Hanuman felled down
Ravana with a fierce blow and conveyed
Saumitri to Rama's side. 398

Soon getting over his discomfiture,
Ravana began shooting
arrows at the Vanara formations,
and threw them into a fright. 399

Hanuman now offered his broad shoulders
as chariot for Rama
to fight Ravana on more equal terms
with sustained power of arms. 400

The issue was thus joined at last between
the great human warrior
and the feared Rakshasa King, and the clash
that followed shook the whole earth. 401

The vanquisher of India and the gods
found Rama invincible,
and lost his bow and diadem, horses,
chariot – even his pride. 402

It was easy for Rama to kill him,
but he offered a reprieve.
'Go back Ravana, you're tired; and return
to fight on a later day.' 403

The gift of his life he owed to Rama's
chivalry and charity,
and this irked Ravana, for he knew how
his foes would mock at him now: 404

and most galling was the thought that Sita
with her lance-like look would now
have her withering laugh at the fallen
Ravana the vain boaster!" 405

Canto 49: Mandodari and Sulochana

Weighed down by an oppressive sense of shame,
the Rakshasa King returned
to his palace, shed his royal trappings
and made for the gynaeceum. 406

He walked with slow unsteady steps, his eyes
had a dull and vacant look,
and he found the great Hall of Carousal
lack-lustre and tenantless. 407

Presently Mandodari, with her own
burden of anguish and fear
o'ertook, and gave her Lord a helping hand,
and guided him to his bed. 408

Words failing, the silence was speech enough,
and when the battle-weary
warrior laid down his exhausted limbs,
the Queen broke down utterly: 409

“Alas my Lord, all colour has left you,
you are sprawled like one inert,
I see defeat and shame struggling in vain
to keep back dreaded despair. 410

O my hero of a thousand campaigns,
cast aside this dejection;
bestir yourself, my Lord, and think again,
and act boldly and rightly.” 411

After an uneasy unearthly pause
Ravana let out a groan
of unimaginable misery
and struggled to say these words: 412

“It's a dark day, Mandodari my Queen,
for this Rama cracked my crown
and worsted me in battle in full view
of the contending armies. 413

And woe is me, my proud Mandodari!
there, but for his generous
gesture, I should be lying on the field,
no more than food for vultures. 414

I live, and I hate this life in disgrace:
 I cannot repent or change:
 I'm like one bound by adamantine chains
 of tragic fatality." 415

Mandodari felt the terrible words
 sink into the unplumbed depths
 of her soul in turmoil, and she ventured
 to speak again to her Lord: 416

"It may be like prodding a painful wound,
 but I must speak as becomes
 great Lanka's Queen, brave Indrajit's mother,
 as also Maya's daughter. 417

Need I remind you, my Lord, ever since
 you seized and brought Sita here,
 a spate of bad omens and misfortunes
 has inundated this land. 418

Not only has she firmly spurned your love,
 but her fiery purity,
 her glow of Grace, has also undermined
 Lanka's deeper harmony. 419

And Hanuman, a mere monkey in form,
 could break through our defences,
 decimate our prized armies, cry havoc
 and set fire to the city. 420

Didn't you feel then, my Lord, 'twas no monkey
 at all but the Almighty
 come in that form to avenge ancient wrongs —
 a million Hanumans now! 421

And in the Council Hall ten days ago,
 the upright Kumbhakarna
 and frank Vibhishana alike advised
 the surrender of Sita. 422

I have seen her too, and I see her still
 sometimes in dreams or nightmares;
 veiled as she is in sadness, she carries
 a Fire in her anguished heart. 423

'Twas not the gigantic monkey, my Lord,
 that set our Lanka ablaze;
 he was but the conduit for Sita's fire
 to erupt o'er the city. 424

Enough, O Lord, the blood that has been shed
 on the battlefield, the tears
 that flow like rivers from Rakshasa homes,
 and the sighs that rise sky-high. 425

One after another the dreaded news
 of the death of the heroes
 invades the ear, and the heart is deadened,
 and a graveyard silence reigns 426

The gallant Jambumali fell a prey
 to Hanuman; Prahasta
 his father, a whole army by himself,
 has now fallen on the field. 427

When Akampana and Vajradhamshtara
 and a host of others fell,
 you marched to the front today supported
 by some of the mightiest. 428

Indrajit's sorcery has been in vain,
 and I shudder at the thought
 that, like Aksha before, all our Princes
 may come to a grievous end. 429

Atikaya, Devantaka, Kumbha,
 Nikumbha, Narantaka,
 Trisiras, and great Indrajit himself,
 and other resounding names: 430

O my Lord, must they all, all the seedlings
 of Lanka's future, and all,
 all the elders, all the generations,
 find their way to cheerless death? 431

I beseech you, husband, warrior, King!
 in the name of the women
 and children and aged ones of Lanka,
 launch a peace offensive now. 432

I can but see a daughter in Sita,
 and a veiled descended God
 in Rama her Lord; and it's not too late,
 O King, to make peace with him." 433

She had spoken with intentness but soaked
 with tears: and although shaken
 by sobs, had managed to communicate
 her prophetic intuitions. 434

The speech, so charged with terror and pity,
 despair and hope, made a dent
 in Ravana's daze of disgrace and dread,
 and he found some words at last: 435

"It may be as you say, Mandodari,
 but I feel entrapped and held
 by some malevolent fatality—
 and there's no escape for me. 436

Easy for you to say, 'Return Sita,
 make friends with Rama'— I wish
 I could indeed rewrite my history
 and reverse my yesterdays. 437

Ah I had everything, Mandodari,
 and now I've lost everything;
 Sita is my fate, Sita my frenzy,
 Sita my blessing, my doom!" 438

As if exhausted by his exertion,
 Ravana suddenly ceased,
 and a deep sleep seemed to overpower him,
 and the wife watched, and waited. 439

She too felt the power of the moment,
 for her imperious Lord
 lay so peaceful, and like a wayward child
 seemed cradled in restful sleep. 440

The minutes passed, the communion acquired
 an identity too deep
 for comprehension, and the vibrations
 fanned out to far horizons. 441

Time almost visibly flowed like a flood,
 and in Mandodari's eyes
 the shore and the recumbent Ravana
 forged a grim identity. 442

He lay neutral, impassive, enormous,
 and the strange co-existence
 of seeming sleep and submerged commotion
 cast almost a spell on her. 443

Then, as she went on gazing at her Lord—
 the Scourge of the Worlds, now stilled
 by the opiate sleep!— Maya's daughter
 felt a mother more than wife. 444

Racing beyond the intervening years,
 she saw the dear familiar
 contours change into summer and springtime,
 and 'twas Meghanad again. 445

She drew a deep breath and sighed, for the boy,
 once that angel-innocence,
 had since waxed in his own father's image,
 and grown a terror in turn; 446

and like his Sire again, had resented
 the sage Vibhishana's word
 of warning and counsel, thus condemning
 Lanka to her hour of doom. 447

In her corrosive anguish of spirit,
 Mandodari asked herself
 what indeed was at the cosmic centre
 that winked at such distortions. 448

As she looked again, and marked the subtle
 variations in breathing
 and repose, she could infer the stages
 of the soul's journey within. 449

But suddenly his slumber seemed disturbed,
 his face was twisted with fear,
 his limbs shuffled, his body heaved and shook,
 and he moaned in deep unease. 450

She saw her dream collapsing, and she placed
 her palm on his fevered head,
 and hoped, as so often before, her touch
 would have a healing effect. 451

As her hand moved gently o'er his body
 steadying his rebel nerves,
 the response was almost immediate
 and the insurrection ceased. 452

The words 'Peace, Peace, my Lord!' surged from the depths, ,
 and she watched with great relief
 the disappearance of the spots and knots
 that had disfigured his face. 453

There lay Ravana, all peaceful once more,
 like a sea becalmed, serene,
 following a harsh spell of commotion
 caused by a bay depression. 454

What dream or nightmare had thrown out of gear
her Lord's equanimity,
the earlier poise of sleep, and unleashed
the kennelled hounds of terror? 455

She had heard it maintained by those that know
that there's the cave of the heart
where the Illimitable holds His court
as the Lord of the Castle. 456

She wondered whether, in that Hour of God,
a battle was being fought
between the past and the future, her Lord
caught in the hub of it all. 457

The minutes crawled like a termite army,
and the tense and distraught Queen,
even as she watched in her deep silence
of faith, inly prayed for peace. 458

And presently she felt a pull towards
some irresistible point
of convergence, the soul's sanctuary—
and she heard soft steps behind. 459

Shaken from that unique moment of trance,
she turned back and was intrigued
but delighted to see Sulochana,
brave Indrajit's espoused saint. 460

Beautiful and behovely as she was,
she exuded a subdued
luminiscence of power befitting
her Naga antecedents. 461

But a vague cloud was darkening her face,
she seemed visibly disturbed,
and dispensing with speech, she raised her eyes
and let their eloquence speak. 462

The elder, deeply concerned, knew something
had somehow gone awry, and
holding the trembling Sulochana close,
she let the tension relax. 463

For a brief interim neither could speak,
but the place, time, occasion
sharply heightened their native perceptions,
and they seemed to throb alike. 464

They stole an anxious glance at Ravana,
 now a reserve of power
 and poise in the sovereignty of deep sleep,
 and Mandodari whispered: 465

"I don't know, Sulochana, what's in store
 for His Royal Majesty
 and gallant Meghanad and fair Lanka,
 and for everyone of us! 466

More and more, my dear, the premonition
 of the end of things haunts me,
 for the wronged Sita in Asoka looms
 as our sole predestined scourge. 467

The King is obstinate, the Ministers
 speak falsehood, fawn or flatter;
 our Rakshasa might and Indrajit's darts
 can neither bite nor deter. 468

Alas Sulochana, my mind misgives,
 I'm gnawed by a sense of guilt
 and I despair of making Ravana
 or Meghanad see reason. 469

Look there, the King lies peaceful in his sleep;
 yet a little while ago
 all hell visited his dream-underworld
 presaging coming events. 470

O Sulochana, in my nightmare life
 I hear the ominous tread
 of irresistible Doom, and a dull
 ding-dong hammers in my ear." 471

Her voice rose despite her self-possession,
 and she deemed it wise to lead
 the Princess to the far end of the Hall
 lest the sleeper be disturbed. 472

Seated, yet still casting anxious glances
 on slumbering Ravana
 every few seconds, the two royal dames
 exchanged their grim forebodings. 473

Sulochana, flame-like in purity
 and beauty, and now driven
 by a grim feeling of fatality,
 decided to have her say: 474

“Ah noble Mother, can you do nothing,
 nothing at all, to avert
 the coming disaster? You’ve seen Sita,
 and I have heard about her. 475

More than once, the clairvoyant Trijata
 has lisped in accents of love
 and adoration of the wronged Sita,
 the sole cause of this conflict. 476

Vain was Uncle Vibhishana’s warning,
 and although Kumbhakarna
 and even my dear Lord are ill at ease,
 they’ll not turn against the King. 477

O mother of Indrajit and mother
 of all Lanka’s citizens,
 where’s the sense in sainted Sita’s travail,
 and all this carnage of war?” 478

Crucial question: these, in which stark despair
 clashed with residual hope,
 and her culminating cry of distress
 fiercely pounded on the heart 479

A pause, and Mandodari gave a groan
 of desperation, and said:
 “Where unreason and passion sit enthroned,
 all good sense goes a-hiding. 480

The insanities of lust and power
 have their own queer compulsions:
 and what are we, the females of the race,
 but expendable trinkets? 481

Some weeks ago, the obsessed Ravana
 took his younger wives and me
 when he visited Asoka Vana
 to win over Maithili. 482

That was the first time I saw her, and how
 can I describe that riddle?
 She was sitting under the Simsupa
 and seemed vested by the Dawn. 483

She wore no jewels, simple her bearing,
 sad and serene her presence:
 with but a piece of Kusa grass between
 she defied the Titan’s strength! 484

O Sulochana, I was then knocked down
 by an apocalyptic
 vision: the prisoner was Ravana, '
 and the justiciar, Sita! 485

All his pomp and power and rhetoric,
 all his inducements and threats,
 fell flat, and Sita spoke fair and fearless
 the scriptures of her Dharma. 486

Stung to the quick, Ravana raised his hand
 as if he would strike Sita,
 but I pushed Dhanyamalini to save
 the situation in time. 487

I know, Sulochana, with Sita's fire
 unextinguished, we're sitting
 on a volcano, and all we can do
 is to pray and hope and wait." 488

For Sulochana, this mournful music
 was but tacit acceptance;
 and she thought, befitting her greener years,
 of a dynamic of peace. 489

"You know, Mother," she said with excitement,
 "I had a view of the war
 yesterday, for I was on the terrace,
 and oh! I saw everything. 490

Like one invincible, Ravana rode
 at the head of our forces,
 and he was environed by Indrajit
 and the cream of our army. 491

Ranged against them, I saw Vibhishana,
 Hanuman, and so many
 hefty Vanaras; and I saw, Mother,
 Rama and Lakshmana too. 492

So these were the dangerous Men! My heart
 went out in allegiance
 in defiance of all dictated norms:
 were they not our enemies? 493

But what could I do, Mother, for the heart
 has its reasons, and my heart
 would only speak the language of God-love
 and filial piety as well. 494

The clash of arms and personalities
 jolted and jarred upon my .
 inferred sympathies, and oh 'twas painful,
 'twas erupting inferno. 495

And Lakshmana dared great Ravana's might,
 and was hurt, and Hanuman
 spirited him away; then Lanka's King
 and Rama met face to face. 496

Arresting and terrible was the scene,
 Lanka from his chariot
 fighting Rama mounted on Maruti, —
 a spectacle for the gods! 497

The fight was unequal in appearance,
 for the hermit-like Rama
 faced Ravana in his regal splendour
 shining with his golden crown. 498

But sundry invisible potencies,
 incantatory missiles,
 supernaturally charged killer-darts
 were being brought into play. 499

And the incredible was happening,
 for Ravana's horses fell,
 his chariot broke, his crown fell down, and
 he reeled under Rama's shaft. 500

But he let the crest-fallen King retire,
 and why? Rama thought perhaps
 that a night's calm reflection might effect
 a change, and war end in peace. 501

All's not lost, Mother, for as I saw then,
 the pair of noble Brothers
 are governed by Dharma's imperatives,
 and not by thoughts of revenge. 502

Just one little gesture, a key-action,
 the return of Maithili
 with no further ado, — and the prospect
 must change from Darkness to Light." 503

Canto 50: **Ravana's Dream**

Sulochana's melting plea, for a fair
deal to Maithili and peace
in Lanka, trembled in the atmosphere,
and hope flickered, and Time passed. 504

But before Mandodari could reply,
there was a stir, the sleeper
gathered himself suddenly, and sat up
with his red eyes wide open. 505

The startled Queen made a rush to her Lord,
and Sulochana followed:
he quickly grasped the fact of their presence,
gestured them to sit, and spoke: 506

"The battle, and the disgrace! It all comes
back to me, Mandodari;
but let me speak of my nightmare, rounded
by another kind of dream. 507

As I grew aware that my consciousness
was growing dimmer, losing
focus and clarity both, all at once
I was cast in oblivion: 508

perhaps in slumber's never-never land,
I was as often before
sold over to high fantasy, a leaf
dancing wildly in the storm. 509

It was a bitter-sweet experience
madly kaleidoscopic,
but I cannot recall what 'twas about —
stuff like bubbles are made of! 510

But midway I was stung to attention,
for it became, you might say,
a prolongation of the battle-scene
and a new phase of my shame. 511

I thought all the three worlds were looking on,
laughing, jeering, exulting;
and while the Vanaras capered with glee,
my Rakshasas were depressed. 512

And soon 'twas worse than worst, Mandodari,
 for I had lost my horses
 and chariot, crown and shining armour,
 and stood there nude before all. 513

All my store of maces, spears, thunderbolts,
 all my arrows, pounders, discs,
 all the charged shafts (the gains of askesis),
 all had failed me in my need. 514

And worse: I seemed to diminish in size,
 my native granite-like pride
 suffered erosion, and when Rama said
 'Go!' I had no prick of shame. 515

Avoiding all prying eyes as I thought,
 I went by devious ways
 and lost myself in the woods near Lanka
 and wished I could cease to be. 516

The trees were like ghosts, a death-like silence
 held sovereignty o'er the leaves,
 I seemed to have reached Death's nether kingdom,
 and no bird's cry could I hear. 517

Now bereft of all strength, my legs slumped down
 and I thought invisible
 beings assailed me like a multitude
 of snakes, wasps and scorpions. 518

I would have cried in elemental pain,
 but somebody from behind
 held my head in a friendly grip and closed
 my lips and my blood-shot eyes 519

I knew then that the Abyss loomed ahead,
 and yet, incontinently,
 my inner senses leapt into action
 in that world of the shadows. 520

For now I saw with a grim clarity
 a processionary march
 of fathers, husbands, brothers whose dearest
 I had outraged in the past. 521

And Kings and commoners too, and Rishis
 and Devas and Gandharvas,
 cast annihilating looks on my shame
 as they stalked past silently. 522

The memoried guilt shot up like lava
 and made a splash on my face,
 and I see-sawed and struggled on my bed
 and wished I could get away. 523

But a ready healing hand descended
 and chased the fear away; and
 the phantoms fled, the fever subsided,
 and I lost all consciousness. 524

I don't know how long was this spell of sleep
 but when awareness revived,
 a desert of hate and a self-absorbed
 lone figure were all I saw. 525

In that dreary immensity of white,
 that monotonous paleness,
 even the dim figure at the centre
 offered residual relief. 526

As I scanned the ambiguous figure
 I wondered who it might be:
 male or female? Asuric or Divine?
 a mockery or a hope? 527

I went on gazing, blinking helplessly
 at that haunting paleface, aye
 that sheer solitary sufficiency—
 my doom or my saviour Grace? 528

Now I had a stab of recognition,
 a clarity of knowing:
 ah the injured one, the long-suffering!
 I was stung to wakefulness!" 529

He stopped as if arrested in his speech,
 and awaiting the response;
 and Mandodari, restraining her fears,
 spoke to assuaging effect: 530

"It will not do, my Lord, to surrender
 to painful introspection;
 for sometime now, I've been keeping a watch
 along with Sulochana. 531

The past is verily beyond recall,
 and to dwell among the dead
 is no more than poisoning the present
 and abjuring the future. 532

Forget, my Lord, what's irretrievable;
 as for the present peril,
 a decisive expiatory act
 can redeem all future time. 533

Having disarmed you in fair fight, Rama
 would have you give thought again;
 doubtless he feels the war can be ended
 and peace return to Lanka. 534

The accusing phantoms in your nightmare
 may be mental projections
 or pricks of conscience; but return Sita,
 that's the nectarean way." 535

In boiling anxiety, Sulochana
 seized her chance and intervened:
 "I would on bended knee appeal to you,
 O Father of the People: 536

think of Indrajit, Atikaya, and
 of Lanka's sons so many:
 think of Mandodari, and mothers all,
 and daughters, and the children! 537

It's proper, O King and benefactor,
 that the chaste, fair and holy
 Sita, as holy as she's heroic,
 is returned with due honour. 538

Though I haven't seen her, I feel attracted
 as to a sister; and for
 Mandodari, what's captive Sita but
 a daughter in affliction? 539

I feel, O great King, that the lone figure
 you saw in your dry desert
 was Sita herself, the sure Avenger —
 or the certain Redeemer. 540

O be not misled by appearances:
 she's not like other women,
 for the Infinite seems to ring her round,
 and her heart must melt with ruth. 541

And O King and Father, pray do not hug
 the self-deceiving notion
 that Rama and Lakshmana are mere men
 driving a pack of monkeys. 542

In the marrow of my bones I feel it.
 O mighty King of Lanka:
 now is the time to act boldly, undo
 the past, and win the future.' 543

Feeling flabbergasted by her courage,
 the frightened Mandodari
 exchanged looks with Sulochana before
 relapsing into silence. 544

By now Ravana was fully awake,
 and while the two were speaking
 the inner lucidity of his mind
 had registered their meaning. 545

He wasn't surprised, and he wasn't angry, but
 a cold desperation, a
 pall of predestination, lay upon
 his soul and paralysed him. 546

Awhile he seemed to struggle with himself;
 then, having made up his mind,
 he squarely faced the two royal ladies,
 met their eyes, and spoke his mind: 547

"Mandodari, my exemplary Queen:
 Sulochana, most admired
 of my daughters: you've spoken as becomes
 your hoary antecedents. 548

We're clearly caught in an hour of crisis
 in great Lanka's history,
 and in my sober moments I can see
 the load of fatality. 549

Both of you seem to think, as others do —
 yes, and Meghanad himself —
 that by returning Sita to Rama
 I can annul all the past. 550

It's not so simple or isolable,
 for o'er a long span of life
 my flawed acts had their compulsions, and their
 cumulation wears me down. 551

Everything good or bad must initiate
 its own chain-reaction, and
 one becomes a pathetic prisoner
 in a self-made inferno. 552

The wages of lust, the lure of power,
 and the gluttony of greed:
 three sins that are one infectious disease,
 their reckoning comes some day. 553

I've lived, O my Queen, a kinetic life,
 a spendthrift profligacy
 of instant indulgence in appetites,
 and this has sickened my soul. 554

I'll not weary you with my long budget
 of wanton misdemeanours.
 but I must needs recall a few at least
 pointed to the occasion. 555

You've doubtless heard of chaste Vedavati,
 and of Apsaras Rambha,
 and, again, of pure Punjikasthali—
 these and others and others! 556

How can I evade the old equation,
 the wages of sin is death?
 And, besides, there were the desecrations,
 thoughtless abominations. 557

I was worse than cruel when I tortured
 one of Rama's ancestors,
 Anaranya, to death—and how can I
 escape his terrible curse? 558

In my blindness and egoistic pride,
 I annoyed Goddess Uma
 and Nandiswara; their imprecations
 must now attain fulfilment. 559

No, no, Mandodari, Sulochana:
 I see you're the sufferers,
 and the future of the Rakshasa race
 and of Lanka is at stake. 560

I know Sita has spurned me, and I know
 my obsession is madness;
 but there's no short-cut to security,
 no evading of my fate. 561

Come, come, my Queen: what sort of hero, King,
 or warrior would I be
 if I made tame surrender to Rama
 and sued for a brazen peace? 562

It may be a false code, a killer-code,
 a wasteful extravagance
 of mutually assured destruction
 and general misery. 563

But oh my worthy Queen, I cannot break
 the ruthless warrior code
 of the fabulous heroic ages,
 and tamely play for safety. 564

'Tis too late in the day for surrender,
 and I cannot jeopardise
 the name and fame of the Rakshasa clan
 for my meed of slothful ease. 565

And, besides, in the complex theatre
 of this earth, our well-laid plans
 are likely to go astray, from a rush
 of the unpredictable. 566

O my Queen, O my daughter, you've spoken
 from the holy of holies,
 the inviolate chamber of your hearts,
 and chiefly for my own good. 567

But suppose I follow this easy line,
 can we vouch for the result?
 Can we really turn back the wheel of Time
 and undo the abduction? 568

Ah I can't ever hope to live it down,—
 the contrivance, cowardice,
 and cruelty of the action! After
 that wind, the present whirlwind! 569

For Sita too, the poor wounded woman,
 who can predict the future?
 There can be no simple cancellation
 of the mangled time between. 570

And so my Queen and my Shakti, whom I've
 too long taken for granted:
 and O rare gift of Grace, Sulochana,
 whom my folly has ignored: 571

forgive me, and the males of the species,
 for all our egotisms
 and iniquities — but it is too late
 to undo my transgressions. 572

A new Dawn is stealing over Lanka,
 and as long as there is life
 there's hope too; and wish me well, both of you —
 let me not falter today. 573

Something may happen still, for I now mean
 to wake up Kumbhakarna;
 I've had rest, and a cleansing of my soul —
 let me meet my Ministers." 574

And without more ado, and not waiting
 for the ladies to answer,
 he gave them an apologetic glance,
 and then slowly went his way. 575

Mother and daughter looked at each other,
 shared a common legacy
 of resignation and fatality,
 and followed with heavy steps. 576

But already the far East was aglow
 with the afflatus of Dawn,
 and clinging to their diminishing hopes
 they defied giant Despair. 577

Canto 51: Kumbhakarna's Fall

'Twas from Sulochana that Trijata
had heard of Ravana's Dream:
now after its recital to Sita
she continued the story: 578

"Ravana felt both refreshed and subdued,
though stricken with weariness
of spirit still, and desired to confer
with his friends and advisers. 579

He remained in an introspective mood,
and the pressure of the past,
the burden of follies and transgressions,
rendered his gait unsteady. 580

Those grim curses which his misdemeanours
had provoked were now asking
for their grand cumulative accounting —
the finis of the story! 581

The rape of Rambha nymph of heaven, and
of Punjikasthali, and
of the fire-pure virgin Vedavati:
Sita was their avenger! 582

Then, turning away from these memories,
he ordered that his brother,
Kumbhakarna, be awakened from sleep
and led to the Council Hall. 583

By birth a colossus even among
the Rakshasas, for each day
of waking he slumbered for six long months,
a phenomenon indeed. 584

He had attended Council but ten days
earlier, and gone to sleep
at once; 'twas no easy matter to wake
that determined slumberer. 585

But the deed had to be done, for the King's
present need was paramount
permitting no delay, and methods harsh
and crude were called into play. 586

- As he lay stretched out in a gaping cave
 of imposing dimensions,
 snoring in his sleep like a mountain hit
 by fierce tempestuous winds, 587
- in vain did the Rakshasa contingent
 try to prick, prod and wake him
 with maces, pestles, iron rods and clubs,
 and even tree-trunks and rocks. 588
- So terrific was his breath that sometimes
 it hurled people Yojanas
 afar, or sucked them into the ample
 caverns of his huge nostrils. 589
- Now horses, camels and elephants had
 to be pressed into service,
 and 'twas an integrated offensive
 that achieved success at last. 590
- He had now to be fed sumptuously,
 and as he got up to go
 he seemed a portent, and he exuded
 a nameless awe and terror. 591
- Thus swung back to consciousness and well fed
 for the fray, the gigantic
 Kumbhakarna let himself be guided
 to the royal Council Hall. 592
- Seated there he slowly recollected
 all that had happened before,
 both the wise words of Vibhishana and
 Ravana's obduracy. 593
- Thus to the King: 'So the War is on, caused
 by your noosing of Sita:
 and Vibhishana's warning and advice
 have been like water on sand. 594
- I'm not the stuff my brothers are made of—
 between my elder's "Evil,
 my Good!" and Vibhishana's "I follow
 my own Truth!", I'm mere *tamas*. 595
- It's not that I do not see you are wrong,
 but since I cannot change you,
 and I lack Vibhishana's clarity,
 I'll fight and lay down my life.'" 596

- While recounting the Council proceedings,
 Trijata became involved
 in the fast developing tragedy
 and spoke with genuine feeling: 597
- “You know, Sita, although Kumbhakarna
 looms a mountain immobile,
 he has his ethical imperatives
 and his own code of honour. 598
- When the despicable Mahodara
 wanted false news to be spread
 that Rama was dead, gaunt Kumbhakarna
 came down heavily on him. 599
- And so the momentous battle began
 between the formidable
 Kumbhakarna and the gallant forces
 of Vanara Sugriva. 600
- As he walked to the front, a vulture whirled
 above and sat on his head;
 the earth shook and vixen howled — but nothing
 daunted, he marched to his doom. 601
- Although at first the giant’s very sight
 scared the Vanaras away,
 Angada rallied them into a fine
 and fierce battle formation. 602
- While the Vanaras assailed him with trees
 and stones and sharp mountain-crests,
 Kumbhakarna wielded his killer-mace,
 or swallowed his opponents. 603
- Some of the bravest of the Vanaras —
 Nila, Gandhamadhana,
 Dvididha, Sarabha and Gavaksha
 failed to contain the giant, 604
- and sturdy Hanuman himself was dazed
 when he was hit by a spear,
 and Anga’a too, receiving a blow
 likewise, fell down unconscious. 605
- Sugriva fared worse, as he was carried
 for a prize to Lanka; but
 he bit the giant’s nose and ears, and flew
 back like wind to Rama’s side. 606

When the mutilated Kumbhakarna
 returned to the front, he was
 hideous and frightful and comic at once,
 but his fighting strength remained. 607

First Lakshmana tackled the colossus,
 but could not force the issue:
 Vibhishana came, but with a blessing
 his elder waved him away. 608

Now Rama leapt into the fray at last,
 and the giant was happy:
 'Come, Tiger among Men as they call you,
 we'll measure each other's might!' 609

Rama began the fight by unleashing
 the less decisive missiles,
 but Kumbhakarna seemed to suck them in
 through the pores of his body. 610

Then Rama sent the Vayu and Indra
 missiles, which cut one by one
 Kumbhakarna's arms; and other sharp darts
 severed the two legs as well. 611

Even so, that mighty mountain of flesh
 with his immense gaping mouth
 looked menacing beyond words, and Rama
 aimed numberless darts at him. 612

Last — to clinch the matter — Rama once more
 sent the Indra shaft, which flew
 like lightning, severed Kumbhakarna's head
 and terminated his life. 613

It was a necessary end, Sita,
 for although not a sinner
 like Ravana, he lacked Vibhishana's
 moral plenitude of strength. 614

But I needs must remember odd facets
 of his native kindliness
 on those rare occasions every six months
 when he moved about with us. 615

The shattering news has reached Ravana,
 and who knows how he will act,
 what mad notions may not o'erpower him
 and cause further confusion. 616

As I rushed here from the City Centre
 I seemed to hear further din
 and clash of arms beyond Lanka's ramparts;
 fighting has begun again!" 617

After Trijata took leave of Sita
 with a wan and weary smile,
 silence reigned although broken now and then
 by bird-cries and woodland sounds. 618

More of this bitterness and violence,
 and who could take the measure
 of the aggregation of suffering
 by the hapless innocents? 619

What had Ravana's unblemished consorts
 to do with his lecherous
 adventures, his blasphemous rampages,
 his ruinous ambitions? 620

And this mighty mountainous Rakshasa,
 the Lord of size and slumber,
 must have hid a child's sensibility
 in his mould of majesty. 621

That the same Kaikasi should have mothered
 Ravana, Surpanakha,
 as also this lately fallen giant,
 and even Vibhishana! 622

Surrendering thus to cerebration,
 Sita felt drawn helplessly
 ever deeper into the labyrinth,
 and this was no good at all. 623

A sudden bustle now disturbed the peace
 around the Asoka Grove,
 and she had the sharp sense of invasion
 by a gang of intruders. 624

Scanning them closer as they came nearer,
 she first recoiled at the sight
 of Ravana who seemed to lead the group,
 but soon she was seized with fright. 625

Who were the others, with their uncertain
 moves and suspicious gestures?
 Another assault on her loneliness?
 or play of necromancy? 626

What did it mean? One of the company
 looked like Janaka in chains;
 the same fair Presence, now under a cloud,
 and the same robes as of old. 627

Ravana led Janaka her father,
 and stopped some paces away,
 and massed behind were the Rakshasa train,
 a spectral miscellany. 628

"O Maithili, I've brought your Father here,"
 said Ravana with a touch
 of unseemly pride; "Vidha is mine,
 and Janaka my vassal. 629

Vaidehi, once more I lay at your feet
 my heart and soul and fortune,
 by accepting me, you can save yourself,
 your father and your country." 630

And the Mithilan King, as if playing
 an agreed role, spoke his part:
 "Listen, oh my Child, before you answer,
 for we're both victims of fate. 631

Hapless as we are, Sita, you can still
 grasp a new felicity
 by accepting the Rakshasa, and you'll
 redeem your Father as well." 632

It was as though a knot of vipers had
 stung her all at once, - and yet
 it was such superlative relief too;
 no, no, this wasn't her father! 633

"Aye, another of your necromantic
 gimmicks, O King!" she burst out,
 "as for you, Spectre! Joker! did you hope
 you could ape my father's soul? 634

The saintly Janaka preached purity,
 and bade me make my Rama
 the sole religion of my life; fool, fool,
 you aren't Janaka, begone!" 635

The withering contempt with which Sita
 dismissed him and the phoney
 Janaka was a slap on Ravana's
 face, and he felt deflated. 636

"I'll kill you and consume you," he thundered
and made a violent move,
but the others held him back, and Sita,
defiant still, taunted him: 637

"You'll not kill me, Rakshasa King, you'll not
kill Janaka, or yourself;
it's my lord, Rama, who will kill you soon,
and none can avert this now." 638

What gave the fragile and trembling Sita
this elemental courage?
Even Ravana was silenced, and he
beat a pitiful retreat. 639

Peace prevailed near the Simsupa again,
and Maithili recovered
her deeper absolute poise, and became
incarnate Patience once more. 640

"Alas for the Queen and Sulochana!"
Sita mused sadly; "so much
for Ravana's Dream, and its chastening
influence on his actions! 641

Ah no, he's like a drowning one clutching
at rods that will drag him down
the more decisively, and not bale him
out of his predicament!" 642

Wisdom, she had learnt from the Rishis, lay
in quietude, acceptance,
patience and prayer, and a reliance
on Grace, its infinitudes. 643

Still she could hardly, bearing as she did
the birthmark of the Earth-born,
quite erase from her memory the strange
hieroglyphs of suffering. 644

She could hear at uncertain intervals
the reverberent echoes
of the insatiable violence of the war
raging outside Lanka's walls. 645

Was it the Vanara shout, or the scream
preluding the final gasp?
or was it yet another Rakshasa
succumbing to Rama's shaft? 646

Maithili found the waiting oppressive,
 a breeding season for fear;
 "Let this end today," she ardently prayed,
 "let Truth and Rama prevail." 647

Ending her session of expectancy,
 the light-stepping Anala
 drew near the Simsupa, and Maithili
 now smiled through her anxiety. 648

"I'm coming from the heart of the city,"
 she began, "penetrating
 the tightened network around Asoka --
 but of course they all know me. 649

Trijata must have told you of the fall
 of Uncle Kumbhakarna,
 the unwieldy hulk of a Rakshasa,
 a Homo Leviathan! 650

He used to carry us on his shoulders,
 and we felt so important:
 only he hadn't the will to sacrifice
 the lower for the higher! 651

The news of his fall weakened Ravana,
 and he cried he was reaping
 the wages of the sin of rejecting
 Vibhishana's sage advice. 652

He was openly shaken, and gave vent
 to his uncontrollable
 grief, and recalling Kumbhakarna's strength,
 marvelled that he too could die! 653

Rather unhinged by this latest reverse
 he played with necromancy
 again, but your exposure of the trick
 was another bitter pill. 654

At this extremity, Ravana's sons
 Trisiras, Atikāya,
 Narāntaka, Devāntaka — rallied
 to his side ready to fight. 655

These royal Princes, the best of their kind,
 adepts in the art of war
 and the grim science of kill and overkill,
 didn't lack the humanities. 656

But now madness is the stern law of life,
 and mad Ravana was glad
 to clasp the loving hands stretched out, and thought
 that he had gained a reprieve. 657

The young Princes, armoured and bejewelled
 and supported by thousands
 of Rakshasa veterans, sauntered forth
 with high hopes of victory. 658

Like a weird rhythm renewing itself,
 the nightmarish clash of arms —
 shouts for yells, teeth and nails for tridents, and
 rocks and trees for javelins — 659

it was the holocaust of war again
 with the grim finality
 of assured annihilation, — only
 motherhood wailing, wailing. 660

Oh Sita, there's something wholly perverse
 or subtly esoteric
 in the tantalising vicissitudes
 of these orgies of killing. 661

Ravana and the Rakshasa race had
 by their prolonged askesis
 stock-piled vast stores of deterrent power
 to strike at their enemies. 662

And so, Sita, these two mere men, Rama
 and Lakshmana, and allies
 so primitive as you might say, wielding
 hill-crests instead of arrows! 663

Somehow the seemingly less armoured side
 fighting on enemy soil, —
 somehow the Vanara hordes have prevailed
 o'er the mighty Rakshasas. 664

There's surely something ineluctable —
 call it Truth, or God, or Grace —
 some unseen universal potency
 that kneads and structures our ends. 665

A Rakshasi born, I too once felt proud
 of our race and its glories
 of askesis, superhuman powers
 and invincibility 666

But I'm Vibhishana's daughter as well,
 and I've my seasons of doubt;
 nevertheless it was your coming here
 that opened my eyes at last. 667

What's the sure source of sustaining power
 that makes you unflappable
 in your helplessness, and turns Ravana
 into a knave and a fool? 668

I must presume it's the self-same power
 immaculate and potent
 that makes a mockery of the titans'
 might and fruits of askesis. 669

For all Narantaka's lust for battle,
 Angada's fist laid him low;
 and Devantaka and Trisiras fell
 before the great Wind-God's son. 670

As for Manōjara, mean and servile
 and despicable, he charged
 against Angada but met his doom when
 Nila smashed him with a tree. 671

Then it was the turn of Atikaya,
 fair Dhanyamalini's son;
 you remember how she shielded you here
 by diverting Ravana. 672

Atikaya, scholar, archer, swordsman,
 driven by fatality
 was to become a worthy oblation
 to the raging fire of war. 673

When the Vanaras found it hard going,
 Lakshmana took him on hand
 and after some bitter fighting, killed him
 with the Brahma-charged missile. 674

The news of Atikaya's death spread like
 fire over Lanka, and his
 mother, distracted and in disarray,
 sought out Ravana and cried: 675

'Where is my son, O King, what has happened
 to your vaunted feats of war?
 Many are we mothers wailing today,
 and you're silent; where's your might? 676

You don't speak, and don't seem even to weep:
are you drained of all feeling?

Ah for Sita's sake and your senile lust,
what's this insane sacrifice?"

677

Many are Ravana's hapless consorts
that thus cry out their distress
and are in terror as to what more might
happen in the coming hours.

678

Ravana the Rakshasa is also
Father of his sons and his
people, but pride and lust and stubbornness
make him his own enemy."

679

Canto 52: **Between Despair and Hope**

After a pause, Anala continued:

“Alas Sita, nobody—
neither old Malayavan, nor the Queen,
the noble Mandodari, 680

neither the tears of the bereaved mothers
nor yet the fervent pleadings
of Sulochana, Indrajit’s consort,
can now hold back Ravana. 681

But like one half demented or under
the power of hypnosis,
or as though bound by predestination,
Ravana enacts his role! 682

Once more he saw by his side the gallant
Indrajit, all the grimmer
for having torn himself away from his
protective Sulochana. 683

For Ravana, ’twas one more pitiful
postponement of the final
reckoning, and he was ready to risk
the choicest of his archers. 684

‘My son, my son, my still surviving son,’
he cried out; ‘that I should live
to see this sad day when I’m left naked
to my puny enemies! 685

The ablest of my heroes have fallen
on the blood-stained battlefield
struck down with ease by mere boyish humans
and woodland bears and monkeys 686

O Indrajit, didn’t the miserable
Brothers somehow win release
from your powerful serpent-darts that bound
them into unconsciousness? 687

What even Devas, Asuras, Yakshas,
Gandharvas and Kinnaras
cannot do, these seemingly feckless men
and monkeys have accomplished. 688

Can it be that Rama is verily
 the preeminent Divine,
 the centre and circumference of all,
 the womb of all, tomb of all? 689

This happy and splendid haven, Lanka,
 now a gloomy prison-house;
 all four gorgeous gates are barred and bolted,
 and grim sentries everywhere. 690

That's the predicament of my city
 where mourning lies like a pall,
 and not a house or mansion but you hear
 its song of lamentation. 691

You may tell me, as Vibhishana did,
 and Kumbhakarna as well,
 that I can even now master desire
 and surrender Maithili. 692

It's not all that simple as people think,
 a summary transaction;
 don't you see I'm verily caught within
 the noose of fatality? 693

I will have my place in myth and legend
 only because of this role
 I play— that of wife-snatcher with a mad
 craving for the forbidden. 694

Should I return Sita on a platter,
 what would be left of me. then?
 But now, for my obsession with Sita,
 I'll live in all future time. 695

Fight for me, and die for me, if you will;
 and if you can't, no matter,
 I can leap into my chariot still
 and give a fight till I die.' 696

Then Indrajit said with resignation:
 'Why should you, noble Father,
 succumb to this depression of spirits
 so long as Indrajit lives? 697

What though so much is lost? All is not lost,
 and the day may still be ours;
 with my will unconquerable, I will
 shock and break the enemy.' 698

Without waiting for Ravana's reply
 but with his silent blessings,
 Indrajit speeded to the battlefield
 with a supporting army. 699

As Meghanad rode in his chariot
 cheered and fanned by the chowries,
 Lanka like the blaze of the setting Sun
 glowed with a deceptive hope. 700

Arriving at the gory battle-front,
 Indrajit made oblations
 to the Fire-God with invocatory
 devilish incantations, 701

and when the terrible Agni appeared,
 Meghanad asked for the shaft,
 the irresistible Brahma-charged dart,
 and seizing it felt secure. 702

By this reckless surrender to Falsehood
 for transient advantage,
 Indrajit had condemned himself indeed
 to final defeat and death. 703

For the ready barter of his moral
 being, the propitiated
 Daemon granted invisibility
 and strike-power for a while. 704

The battle raged once more, and for that hour
 cut out of eternity
 he rained destruction and caused disarray
 among the Vanara ranks. 705

Even the most seasoned – Gaja, Maṇḍa,
 Gandhamādana, Nila,
 Sugriva, Hanuman – were unequal
 to the unholy contest. 706

Sustaining hits from sharp arrows that came
 from a source invisible,
 Rama himself grew thoughtful and advised
 inaction to Saumitri: 707

'Our side is demoralised, the sharp darts
 come from Nowhere, and the best
 we can do is total self-containment,
 a condition of stasis 708

And, besides, he may be soon discharging
 the terrible Brahma-shaft,
 and the wiser course would be to submit
 for the nonce in askesis.' 709

When thus they lapsed into unconsciousness
 silencing their faculties,
 Indrajit felt buoyed up with his success
 and rushed to inform the King. 710

'It's all over, Father,' he said briefly;
 'their army is a shambles,
 all their leaders are put out of action,
 and the Brothers are finished!' 711

For the anxious Rakshasa King, 'twas like
 ambrosia to the dying,
 and Indrajit too, flushed with victory,
 retired to his apartments." 712

Actually when his triumphant son
 had withdrawn from his presence,
 Ravana slipped into introspection
 and faced his moment of Truth. 713

Alone with his uncamouflaged nude self,
 he could now see the mirror
 image of his mind, heart and tortured soul,
 and knew he was lost indeed. 714

He had grown sere and unsure, and perhaps
 people could see the colour
 of coming events, and everybody
 was pressing him with advice! 715

The puny Rama had had the better
 of great Lanka's mighty King,
 and all the worlds had witnessed his disgrace,
 his abject discomfiture. 716

And what ignominy, Ravana thought,
 that these forest denizens,
 the despicable bears and Vanaras,
 should outdo his Rakshasas! 717

His doughtiest had failed and licked the dust
 of the gory battlefield;
 Kumbhakarna, matchless in his main strength
 and colossal in his cast: 718

the intrepid swordsmen, Devantaka,
 Narantaka, Trisiras,
 and the peerless Atikaya, buoyant,
 handsome and impetuous. 719

And wasn't it strange that, while his own forces
 were steadily thinning out,
 the monkeys and bears seemed to replenish
 somehow their heavy losses? 720

Indrajit's victory was deceptive,
 for 'twas not arms against arms,
 nor an army of Rakshasas fighting
 a multitude of monkeys. 721

Ravana thought there were other powers,
 mysterious potencies,
 operating behind the scenes, turning
 his best strength into weakness. 722

His dream-vision on the night of disgrace
 with its pins of self-knowledge
 and stabs of self-impeachment burnt him still
 and could not be wished away. 723

The long slumbering psychic entity,
 obscured by the mountain-mass
 of the desire-dominated ego
 was now a worm of dissent. 724

It stirred, crawled and burrowed within, causing
 no end of unease, and yet
 powerless to alter the direction
 of his road to perdition. 725

'Twas an excruciating inquisition,
 the soul's voiceless indictment
 being met by a mix of evasions
 and tardy recognitions: 726

"I am what I am, the flawed progeny
 of my father and mother;
 and the evil hour of my conception
 decreed the course of my life. 727

'Tis said of my antagonist, Rama,
 that his life's law is 'One shaft,
 one word, one wife!' and never a second;
 and that is the way he's made. 728

But another law has governed my life,
and grown into a licence
it has used the great power of my arms
for my bouts of indulgence. 729

After holy Mandodari, Maya's
incomparable daughter,
what reckless cussedness made my fancy
roam in pastures out of bounds? 730

And my appetite of diseased lust found
neither fulfilment nor joy,
and must be unceasingly on the prowl
for victims constantly new. 731

Experience has gathered o'er the years,
yet knowledge has lagged behind,
and corrective existential wisdom
has stubbornly passed me by. 732

Alas, my conquests whether of kingdoms,
of warriors or beauties,
have but stimulated my appetite
and worsened the malady. 733

Of what use are a thousand victories,
a gynaeceum of trophies,
when I've cheated myself of the supreme
conquest of my desire-self? 734

Desire isn't mastered by self-indulgence
any more than raging fire
is put out by ghee; and lechery but
eats itself demanding more! 735

No, no, for one like me with my dead weight
of self-won fatality,
there's no makeshift retrieval from the brink,
no face-saving compromise 736

The worst of all is that I still cannot
fetter my insane ardour
and maddening passion for Maithili,
and I burn, burn, all the time. 737

Angelic Mandodari has failed, and
Sulochana has failed, and
angry Dhanyamalini has failed, and
my Dream and Vision have failed. 738

Unlike all my previous infatuations,
 this my current lunacy
 by the very fact of non-attainment
 consumes me as forest fire. 739

It's all right for the prudent worldly-wise
 and the ones apprehensive
 about Lanka's future to advise me
 to make my peace with Rama. 740

As well darken the brightness of the Sun
 or reverse the march of Time
 or halt the stern Law of Causality
 as change the bent of my mind! 741

I will not, I cannot, give up Sita,
 and I cannot, out of fear
 or craven calculation, sue for peace
 and lick the dust of Rama. 742

Be it today, tomorrow or after,
 let the bitter fight go on;
 Sita may be beyond me, she may prove
 the blood-red ray of Lanka; 743

but I who have lived on this earth too long
 and piled up Himalayas
 of iniquities can find no escape
 to safety with self-respect. 744

The prevailing luck after Indrajit's
 success in arms cannot last;
 the ancient verities cannot be mocked;
 and my Time must have a stop!" 745

Meanwhile the sight of the fallen Brothers,
 lying inert as though dead,
 had spread depression and fear in the ranks
 of the Vanara army. 746

"But my Father," reported Anala,
 "rallied their drooping spirits,
 explaining that Rama and Lakshmana
 were only playing a game. 747

While he went round the Camp with Hanuman
 boosting the flagging morale
 of the Vanaras, the wise Jambavan
 advised remedial measures. 748

Forthwith Maruti flew beyond the seas
 to the sacred mountain-range,
 broke off a hill-crest rich with healing herbs
 and was soon back in the Camp. 749

The very breath of the approaching herbs —
Sanjivini and the rest —
 galvanised Raghava and Saumitri,
 and soon all were healed indeed. 750

And this, Sita, was the odd thing about
 the feat of resurrection:
 while all the Vanara dead, hurt or sick
 were restored to life and health, 751

the Rakshasas derived no benefit,
 for all their dead and wounded
 had been hastily dumped into the sea
 lest they cause disaffection! 752

It's Ravana's strange notion that the killed
 or maimed, when seen by others,
 will quite undermine civilian morale
 and lead to loss of prestige. 753

He doesn't want to know that this is a doomed
 city — that crippling damage
 has been done with every house lamenting
 the loss of its male members. 754

On Rama's side, however, the healing
 now completed, Maruti
 conveyed the hill back to Himalaya
 and returned with lightning speed. 755

Such is the present posture of affairs;
 and the Vanara leaders,
 unmindful of the night, are in council,
 and surprises are in store." 756

Now Anala went, promising she would
 come later, and in that grim
 witching hour of the night, Maithili's mind
 was in a mighty ferment: 757

"Yes, I'm Sita still with all my current
 load of pain and suffering;
 but something tells me I'm my Mother too,
 universal Mother Earth. 758

And I'm all the daughters of the Mother
 and must share their misery;
 now the wound is mine, now hers, and thousands
 feel the heart-ache all the time. 759

The tenor of Anala's—Trijata's—
 vivid strips of reportage,
 whether of Vanara or Rakshasa
 caught in the wild Dance of Death, 760

always the earth-mother in me trembles
 for my daughters' bemoaning
 of father, uncle, husband, brother, son
 offered to the raging fire. 761

As Sita, my hurts, pains, lacerations
 and woes interminable
 drive me almost to the brink of despair,
 and only Grace retrieves me. 762

But this outflow of consciousness, or this
 equation with the Mother
 and all her daughters too, that's part of my
 terrestrial destiny. 763

Nay more, for the Mother universal,
 Madhavi, is also one
 with the sublime Lord and omnipotent
 Master of the triple worlds. 764

This simultaneity of existence
 at divers levels—mine own,
 my maternal ambience, and the Ground
 of Being and Transcendence: 765

I can't see where one ends and the other
 begins, and how all three merge
 in my zero insignificance here,
 yet remain infinity! 766

Ah this cruel sundering from Rama
 and the chain of miseries
 it engenders for such a variety
 of humans, monkeys, Titans! 767

But if my dear Lord and Lover and God
 were truly severed from me,
 have I autonomy enough to breathe
 or think or despair or hope? 768

'He's here, he's not here,' are emanations
 of a dual perception,
 and what reigns is beyond the human ken,
 but Grace remains, and what's Grace . . . 769

She had not reached the end of her deeper
 ruminations when broke in
 the excited Trijata, followed by
 the weary-eyed Anala. 770

"All hell-fire has been let loose on Lanka,"
 cried Trijata in distress;
 "O Sita, it's as I dreamt at the time
 Hanuman visited you. 771

This is what seems to have happened: after
Sanjivini revived all
 the Vanara hosts, Sugriva ordered
 the invasion of Lanka. 772

The nimbler and heftier Vanaras
 easily scaled Lanka's walls
 under cover of night, and their torches
 started fires all o'er the place. 773

It was like the havoc Maruti caused
 when his tail was set on fire,
 and he took revenge by rampaging on
 a wild incendiary spree. 774

Palaces and mansions came tumbling down
 making deafening noises;
 shattered were the four prestigious gateways,
 and rubble-heaps in their place. 775

What a phenomenal conflagration:
 sandalwood, silks, tiger-skins,
 garments in lamb's wool, golden ornaments—
 now all have gone up in smoke. 776

The helpless inmates, taken by surprise
 and many roused from slumber,
 acted in tragic or farcical ways
 and cursed the day they were born. 777

Anala tells me that the confusion
 was rather catastrophic;
 and trapped in their apartments high above,
 women wailed most piteously. 778

- Lanka lit up on this darkest of nights
seemed, she says, the boiling sea,
and the cattle, horses and elephants
were in a frenzy of fright. 779
- And when the able-bodied Rakshasas
tried to escape from Lanka,
they were set upon by the Vanaras
on guard outside the ramparts." 780
- Trijata paused as if quite exhausted
by the effort to re-live
the midnight phantasmagoria, and
Anala added some more: 781
- "I've just come from Lanka, and what I've heard
and seen defies description.
The midnight operation first provoked
a massive counter-attack. 782
- Ravana sent some of his best fighters
for a counter-offensive,
and in the hectic melee that ensued
Angada killed Kampana: 783
- Sōnitāksha, Prajangha, Yūpāksha
who made a reckless joint front
fell to the aggregate might of Mainda,
Angada and Dvididha. 784
- With these warriors silenced one by one,
the Rakshasa army turned
for succour to Kumbha and Nikumbha,
Kumbhakarna's mighty sons. 785
- After holding at bay the combined might
of Angada, Jambavan,
Maṇḍa and Dvididha and Sushena,
the impetuous Kumbha, 786
- who firmly declined the grace extended —
'Get rested, and come again!' —
by chivalrous Sugriva, was knocked down
by a fell blow from his fist. 787
- Nikumbha now entered the field eager
to avenge his brother's death,
but, after a bitter fight, Hanuman
fiercely battered him to death. 788

Maddened by the inexorable march
of events, Ravana sent
Khara's son, the cruel Makarāksha,-
to stem the worsening rot. 789

His opening onslaught gave disquiet
to the Vanara forces,
and this brought Rama's bow into action
with immediate result. 790

Makarāksha fumed at sight of Rama
the killer of his father,
Khara, at Janasthana, and felt roused
to wreck his revenge on him. 791

The combat tha' ensued was most bitter
but Rama closed upon him,
split his bow, broke his chariot, and killed
him with the Agni-charged shaft." 792

Canto 53: **Indrajit's Fall and After**

- Having paused for recovering her breath,
Anala resumed her tale:
“This latest reverse made Ravana turn
once more to his eldest son. 793
- And his face grim, cloud-like and glowering,
the resolute Indrajit,
resolved on victory at any cost,
made his fire-oblations first. 794
- His supernatural soliciting
had paid ample dividends
on earlier occasions; now he would
clinch the issue and prevail. 795
- I know only this, neither his mother,
Mandodari, nor his wife,
Sulochana, liked the fanatic eyes
that seemed hell-bent on success. 796
- Sita, I saw his face at a distance
as he invoked his Daemon;
I didn't like it, and in a nameless fright
I hurried to Trijata. 797
- I don't know, and I dare not speculate
what the mad creature will do,
or has done; the dark is still darker now,
and the dawn is far away. 798
- But I've Mother Sarama's word she will
keep a vigilant eye on
happenings, and I know she will find means
to communicate with us.” 799
- Long past midnight, and now racing towards
an uncertain dawn over
battered Lanka and its constituent
Garden of Hope, Asoka: 800
- three silent figures primordially
feminine, Devi Sita
as Maheswari, Kali Trijata,
Anala-Saraswati! 801

The slow tread of the seconds and minutes
 here in the sheltered Garden,
 and the wild frenzy of the race of Time
 just across the enclosure! 802

As her eyes rested with infinite love
 and gratitude on the twain,
 Sita felt eternally bound with them
 and shed a few holy tears. 803

The peace that prevailed in their midst belied
 the native fury raging
 in their separate cerebral cockpits
 concerning coming events. 804

Between this holocaust of suffering
 innocence and the stern faith
 in final victory over Darkness,
 the shadows rehearsed their role. 805

The pre-dawn hour of densest inconscience, —
 with the Dark at the zenith
 and the light of Hope lost in the nadir, —
 slowly measured out its span. 806

From the remote theatres of conflict
 stray echoes of violence
 and reverberations of the death-gasps
 penetrated Asoka. 807

Whenever Sita caught the vibrations,
 a shudder shook her being,
 and she could sense that her two companions
 were equally affected. 808

In this intricately interwoven
 web of existential life,
 how was self-isolation or selfish
 insulation to be won? 809

Sita, Trijata, Anala: they spoke
 folios without speaking,
 and in their cold passivity, they shared
 all the warfront's pain and tears. 810

Not admitting it even to themselves,
 they were still tense, expectant,
 and as the slow minutes crawled their life out,
 Sarama herself appeared, 811

and announced: "Sita, Indrajit is dead,
fallen before Saumitri;
now Ravana's back is broken* – the rest
is but a question of time. 812

Anala must have told you how, after
Khara's son's death, Indrajit
marched to the warfront, grimly determined
he would destroy the Brothers. 813

His expertise in marksmanship, coupled
with his magical powers,
helped him to direct the most lethal darts
from an invisible pad. 814

The night was rendered darker by the smoke
from his exploding arrows,
and whole battalions of brave Vanaras
fell unconscious on the ground. 815

When in quick retaliation Lakshmana
threatened to exterminate
the Rakshasas, Rama detailed the checks
ordained by the Code of War: 816

'War is not wholesale murder, Saumitri:
we should spare the innocent,
and those that abandon all resistance,
or seek safety at our hands. 817

It's true Indrajit employs sorcery
and wages an unjust war:
we'll soon find a way of silencing him
without involving others.' 818

The fire and brimstone in Lanka last night
was on Sugriva's, and not
Rama's reflex action, but Indrajit
had brought it on his people. 819

Now wily Meghanad's magic invoked
an ethereal Sita,
and albeit an insubstantial figment,
enough to cause confusion. 820

Indrajit held up this apparition
before the Vanara ranks
and Hanuman himself, and a chill air
lashed at them like poisoned knives. 821

Even to the keen and reverent eyes
 of Maruti the spectre
 seemed the person and presence of *Ā*Devi:
 the same eyes and single plait! 822

With a flourish, *Indrajit* struck at it
 with his hand, and as it cried
 'Rama, Rama!', he cast the lifeless form
 on the field for all to see. 823

'O *Vanara*!' he cried to *Hanuman*,
 'now all your labour is lost:
 and I'll seek out *Rama* and *Lakshmana*,
 and kill them both, and you too!' 824

Overcoming the shock of the moment
Hanuman rallied his ranks,
 made a fierce stand for a while, — then arranged
 for an orderly retreat. 825

When he reported the cataclysmic
 development to *Rama*,
 there was disbelief teaming with despair,
 and their vision was clouded. 826

Presently astute *Vibhishana* came,
 and fathoming the reason
 for the prevalent gloom, spoke the right words
 surging from his ripe knowledge: 827

'Rid yourself of this delusion, *Rama*,
Lakshmana, *Sugriva*, all:
 it's one more heinous trick by *Indrajit* —
 but *Maithili* is alive! 828

I see the strategem only too well:
 a mean ruse to distract you,
 while *Indrajit* is at *Nikumbila*
 engaged in a sacrifice. • 829

Should he bring to fruition his evil rites,
 he will be invincible;
 there's no time to lose, give battle to him
 at *Nikumbila* at once.' • 830

Greatly relieved yet seized with urgency,
 as directed by *Rama*,
Saumitri and the *Vanara* forces
 made haste to fight *Indrajit*." 831

- During Sarama's controlled recital
of the midnight happenings,
Sita and the two sisters felt varied
and quick-changing emotions: 832
- shock at Indrajit's perfidy, anger
and agony for Rama's
suffering, and joy that Vibhishana
had exposed the plot in time. 833
- Sarama continued her narrative:
"Sita, it was a near thing,
for Meghanad was rapt in his foul rites
already at the Temple. 834
- But sustained by Vibhishana's counsel,
Saumitri struck with fury,
and Hanuman and the army maintained
the tempo of the attack. 835
- Indrajit's defence cover was shattered,
and he found himself exposed
in the profane spot where Lakshmana's darts
assailed him unerringly. 836
- Thus wrenched prematurely from the Chaitya
and thrown on the defensive,
he was furious the rites were ruined
and fought with redoubled ire. 837
- Sighting Vibhishana, Indrajit flew
into a rage and charged him
with treachery, but the uncle hit back
and reaffirmed his Dharma. 838
- The bitter fight to a finish between
Saumitri and Indrajit
now began with the shadows darkening
yet further, and no holds barred. 839
- Being evenly matched in weaponry
and equally determined
to win, they were like fierce feuding lions
or clashing constellations. 840
- The rapid exchange of darts but increased
the tempo of the fighting,
and while blood flowed freely from their bodies,
neither showed signs of fatigue. 841

As the battle raged with mounting frenzy,
 Vibhishana intervened
 to decisive effect and exhorted
 his side to strike harder still: 842

‘Many Rakshasa leaders have fallen,
 and frightful is the roll-call:
 Kumbha, Nikumbha, Jangha, Prahasta,
 and Kumbhakarna himself: 843

Indrajit is the King’s remaining prop,
 and I would kill him myself
 but my eyes grow dim — and so Saumitri,
 tackle the hero at once.’ 844

For a while longer the battle raged, and
 Lakshmana, Indrajit, and
 Vanaras and Rakshasas, were locked up
 in a dreadful death-grapple. 845

As he gained a steady ascendancy,
 Saumitri made Indrajit
 lose his horses and chariot, and they
 waged the battle on the ground. 846

The expert bowmen releasing arrows
 charged with diverse potencies
 enacted rapid strike and counter-strike
 and crescendoed the suspense. 847

But all dread Indrajit’s ingenuities
 were to fail in the end, and
 Saumitri’s shaft, shot with the Indra-spell,
 severed the warrior’s head. 848

With that hero’s death, his army scattered
 in panic, and Lakshmana
 received superlative praise for his feat,
 and his wounds healed on their own. 849

‘It’s as though Ravana’s right hand is gone,’
 said Rama with great relief;
 ‘doubtless he’ll come now with a mighty force,
 but our victory is sure.’” 850

Sarama continued: “The stunning news
 of Indrajit’s death threw down
 Ravana as one struck dead, and when he
 woke up, he wept piteously. 851

For some minutes he was incoherent,
whimpering and wallowing
in the peevish gutter of grievances
against traitors and false friends, 852

railing wildly about men and monkeys
and threatening reprisals:
and in the sore mood of desperation,
there's nothing he might not do! 853

It was distressing beyond words to see
the bereaved Mandodari
and the widowed Sulochana, alike
humped in the silence of grief. 854

Hadn't they, with their creeping premonitions
and intuitive grasp of things,
quite seen through the façade of appearance
and warned both father and son? 855

The Rakshas, hugging his ego still,
must deny the higher Light,
rely on double-edged boons from the gods,
and take the road to ruin. 856

'Twas a terrible and pitiful sight,
Sita, for the bereaved ones
fixed an unwinking stare on Meghanad
suppressing the flood of tears. 857

Mother, mother, sorrowing mothers all,
Lanka mother of mothers,
her travail of motherhood; Mother Earth
and her sorrowing daughters! 858

As I was hurrying to reach this Grove,
people in groups were talking —
for the long night was spending itself out —
with uncomprehending looks. 859

There is sorrow that the Crown Prince is dead,
but in muted mutterings
folks blame the mad obsession of the King
for Lanka's predicament. 860

I heard too, the first time since war began,
people talking openly
and venomously of Surpanakha —
the source of it all. they say, 861

They confer among themselves in small groups
 cursing the day she came here
 from Dandaka to inflame Ravana,
 her vulnerable Brother. 862

Revenge and lust, the ancient lunacies:
 revenge for Khara's fourteen
 thousand fallen in Dandaka, and lust
 for the purest of women! 863

Thwarted herself in her unseemly lust
 for the Prince of Ayodhya,
 she needs must involve our Rakshasa race
 and drive it to bite the dust! 864

Vibhishana did his best, and even
 Kumbhakarna made his point:
 only Surpanakha, engine of fate,
 has fuelled Lanka's downfall. 865

I heard one almost hiss out from the depths:
 'I could hush up this serpent
 for all the ills she has let loose on us—
 but no, she's unsinkable!' 866

Another said: 'I don't know, the temper
 of the people is nasty;
 should she now make a public appearance,
 I cannot vouch she'll be safe . . . ' 867

Sarama had not concluded her tale
 when, at the Asoka Gate,
 there was the surrising flash of torches
 and the scurrying of steps. 868

Reacting instinctively, Maithili
 sat under the Simsupa
 in her self-protective stance, and looked like
 the Goddess of sufferance. 869

And Sarama and her daughters, scenting
 the imminence of trouble,
 withdrew in haste to the wings, but ready
 for intervention in need. 870

Now sure enough, with a profane flourish,
 his eyes blazing with anger,
 his movements spasmodic and uncontrolled,
 Ravana glared at Sita. 871

His dark face, ever fearful to behold,
all the more forbidding now
being disfigured by desperation
and the desire for revenge; 872

his menacing armour and weaponry —
the gains of long askesis —
and the shining sword held in his firm grip:
'twas wrathful Rudra himself! 873

Behind him were some of his ministers
agitated and worried,
and charmers from the gynaeceum crying,
and trying to distract him. 874

Seeing Ravana advance towards her,
his eyes aglow with hatred,
his hand gripping the handle of the sword,
and his menace like Yama's: 875

and grasping the sense of his wicked words —
“Ah my brave son, Indrajit,
only killed a phantom Sita; I will
now hack down the real one!” 876

Sita felt pushed to the brink of her life
and sobbed uncontrollably:
“He'll sword me, and has perhaps already
killed Rama and Lakshmana. 877

Had I only let myself be carried
by Hanuman on his back,
I would be with my beloved Rama
but alas for Kausalya!” 878

Stung to remonstrance by her moving words,
his minister, Supārsva,
frantically appealed to Ravana
to see wisdom and hold back: 879

“How can you, O mighty King and Master
of Vedic lore, raise your hand,
defying the Laws of Dharma, against
a hapless woman you love? 880

Direct your wrath, O King, to the hero,
Rama, and to Lakshmana
the killer of your brave son, Indrajit:
you may yet win Maithili!” 881

The women in Ravana's entourage,
 with Sarama joining them,
 rushed forward to make a defensive ring
 round the swooning Maithili. 882

His wild frenzy having spent itself out,
 Ravana held back his hand
 as though accepting Suparsva's advice
 and hied back to his palace. 883

There was general relief, and as they
 followed their Lord, his spouses
 cast friendly backward glances at Sita,
 fast reviving from her shock. 884

"Let me go now, Sita," said Sarama;
 "all's well now, but I'll return
 to the base and keep an eye on events
 and send word through Anala." 885

Canto 54: Suspense and Apocalypse

Darkness receding, the Sun was rising,
and Sita and Trijata
prayed inly that the new day would witness
Rama's final victory. 886

Trijata broke the oppressive silence
with the comment: "Isn't it strange,
Sita, that Ravana can so swiftly
hop from love to taking life? 887

He ignored all moral imperatives,
all prudence and propriety,
when he stole you like a thief and professed
an overmastering love. 888

And now, his army largely routed, his
warrior sons all dead, his
love turns to hatred, and with sword in hand
he rushes here to kill you!" 889

Sita answered slowly with a faint smile:
"Where's the surprise, Trijata?
He has always held the threat, 'Accept me,
or I'll hack you for my meal!' 890

Why profane the name and nature of Love
when with such monsters as these
it's merely a sickness of appetite,
a race to possess or kill? 891

Mandodari his exemplary Queen,
the fair Dhanyamalini,
and companions so many, none of them
could fetter his roving lust, 892

for this fever, this sickness, this madness --
wasn't Dasaratha himself
a slave to Kaikeyi's charm? -- this craving
is not Love, but a death-wish 893

O Trijata, how many follies, how
many crimes, and how many
wanton desecrations aren't committed
in the gloried name of Love? 894

There's the hunger of the body, the worse
 hunger of the mind, both fed
 by the hunger of the ego — all end
 in mere satiety and death. 895

'Twas because of this same aberration
 that Indra, who is neither
 Asura nor Man but the god of gods,
 ruined fair Ahalya's life. 896

I've seen, Trijata, the resurrected
 Ahalya, more goddess than
 woman, and more divinely human than
 many flawed divinities. 897

Yes, I've known the native splendour of Love
 in my holy wedded life,
 and this Love is wide as the universe
 and wholly enfranchising. 898

I suffer from physical severance
 from Rama, but the life-force
 that's his love, an ambrosial ambience,
 enfolds and sustains me still. 899

When will people learn, Trijata, to use
 words in their right sense; when will
 they learn to value love and peace and life
 and turn back from hate, war, death?" 900

Trijata was lost in thought for a while
 before the words came: "Sita,
 all this push of desire and heat of war
 and insane largesse of death!" 901

To what end all Ravana's *tapasya*?
 the boons he wrested? the shafts
 he secured? the run of his victories?
 the extent of his empire? 902

Surely such excessive or obsessive
 ambition is a danger
 and a trap for body, heart, mind and soul,
 an invitation to death! 903

When people secure immunity boons
 there's a fatal catch somewhere;
 and my Father, citing a precedent,
 warned the King to be wary. 904

Asura Hiranyakasipu thought
 that neither day nor night would
 witness his death, no weapon would cause it,
 nor animal, god or man. 905

And he met his death in the twilight hour
 on a doorstep, his body
 split by the sharp nails of Narasimha,
 Lion's head on Man's body! 906

I now see that Rama was wise to tell
 Kaikeyi: 'Take the Kingdom
 for Bharata; I'll spend, since that's your wish,
 fourteen years in the forest.' 907

When you thus surrender rather than seize,
 however heavy-going
 it may seem for a time, Providence must
 shape things fair in course of time." 908

Thus faith and hope: faith against disbelief,
 hope against desperation;
 the see-saw between life and death, or love
 and hatred, pre-occupies itself! 909

The weary minutes crawled miserably,
 and Asoka's silences
 as often before, were punctuated
 by weird sounds from near or far. 910

In their private universes, Sita
 with her earth-affinities,
 and Trijata with her clairvoyances,
 explored the contingencies. 911

As she brooded o'er the sordid features
 of her uncle's abduction
 of Sita, the cowardly acquiescence
 by the royal courtiers, 912

the petrified helplessness of the true
 well-wishers of Ravana,
 Trijata recoiled from the strategies
 of the Sita-obsessed King. 913

Ruse after infantile ruse engineered
 by brazen calculation,
 shadow-boxing with Vidyujjihva's tricks
 and melodramatic hits, 914

the doughty Meghanad's self-demeaning
diversionary gimmicks,
the ready resort to necromancy
or cold-blooded violence: 915

first the fake body of lifeless Rama,
then the Raghus entangled
in the meshes of potent serpent-darts,
next the Janaka spectre, 916

anon the slaying of the ghost Sita,
and this latest infamy,
Ravana's run to Asoka to kill,
yea, hack the living Sita! 917

The psychic Trijata had a tremor,
her body shook, the scales fell
from her burning eyes, and she seemed to see
far, far into the future. 918

The sights she saw, the horrors, perversions,
the moral obliquities,
the sharp reversions to the bestial,
the wild orgies of the night! 919

'Twas with a mighty effort Trijata
read the script of the vision,
and turning now to the startled Sita,
spoke in feverish accents: 920

"O Sita, what nightmarish sights are these,
a tapestry unrolling,
and the future throwing up horrendous
spurts of possibility! 921

Mark the male of the species – call him Man,
or Asura, or Deva –
infinite his expertise, whether for
creation or ruination! 922

The sights add up to an apocalypse
of blinding intensity:
and oh, the woman, the child, the aged,
and all the defenceless ones! 923

Woman is often admired and cherished,
installed on a pedestal
as Shakti, Sundari, Grihalakshmi,
or Mahasaraswati; 924

but her sacredness is expendable,
 she is property for sale,
 a pretty piece for gambling at the board,
 a ready cake to swallow! 925

'Puissance' her name, and 'puissance' her birthright;
 were it not for her puissance
 Woman couldn't be the Mother of the race,
 the fosterer of mankind. 926

Yet by force of custom she's diminished
 being caged in gold, curtained
 by silk that's stronger than steel, and branded
 as the temptress fair or foul. 927

It was the blight original shackling
 mankind, for although nothing
 forgetting, Man will learn nothing either
 from the cycles of living. 928

I see in the dim beckoning vistas
 the race preying on itself,
 reciprocal violence of thought, speech,
 desire, feeling and action. 929

Alike the means of attaining power
 and its ruthless exercise
 corrupt the soul at first, and presently
 the concentric sheaths entire. 930

And killer Tyranny flaunts a grimmer
 dimension when it erupts
 from fevered feminine psyches, as if
 milk itself has turned poison. 931

O Sita, there's but the thinnest divide
 between the extremities,
 for when one shies away from Truth, the jaws
 of the Abyss open wide. 932

Beauty, love and the creator spirit
 of motherly compassion
 can turn into foulness, hate or Kali's
 Dance with a garland of skulls. 933

O all suffering Sita, I but see
 mother, sister, child in you;
 I think I glimpse behind the wronged woman
 the sole saviour Madonna. 934

Let this age waste itself out as it likes,
 let the Dark Ages to come
 enact their sundry self-wrought ironies
 of ambition, pride, defeat. 935

But Sita, your Yoga of Sufferance,
 your containment of Power
 in the face of Evil Unlimited,
 must yet redeem the future. 936

Ah, looking desperately for the stars
 beyond the confounding clouds,
 I can but see human ingenuity
 in ugly adventurings. 937

'God, God,' mumbles foolish and fragile Man,
 but gnawed by the worm within,
 he would if he could play the usurper
 and run the Earth on his own! 938

I shudder to see the developing
 pageantry of prideful Man,
 mindless and ceaselessly exploitative
 with environing Nature: 939

all things are legitimate in his eyes,
 and he must explore the veiled
 mysteries, energies and the knotted
 formulas of life and death. 940

Polyfoliate life is so ordained
 by the supreme Creatrix
 that a basic balance prevails, albeit
 forms, colours, smells, tastes vary. 941

Sap of roots or juice of plants or leaves' smell
 can initiate reactions
 that correct erupting imbalances
 and restore the harmony. 942

Herbs are a million, and there's not a blade
 in the flora around us
 but has its unfailing efficacy,
 its therapeutic value. 943

Nature with its limitless resources,
 expertise and artistry
 both permits a thousand miscarriages
 and effects the needed cures. 944

But Sita, I tremble at what I see
in the abysm of Time,
the future with its wide ravenous jaws
and hideous nut-cracker teeth. 945

I see cunning, greedy and ruthless Man,
revengeful and rapacious,
go all out against Prakriti, scornful
of the soul's imperatives. 946

He would fain wrest the ultimate secrets
of birth and balance and health,
dissect the visible Mother herself
and squeeze out the final groans. 947

Plugging or unplugging his contraptions,
playing his incendiary
game of edgeman'ship to gain the whole world,
he gambles it all away. 948

He packs the petty cylinder space
or a pumpkin-sized toy-box
the raging roaring suffocating airs
that vaporise a city. 949

Not wars, nor earthquakes, nor pestilences,
nor volcanic eruptions,
but brain-born lunacies of contrivance
may cry Finis to the Earth! 950

And mark further: this mad rape of Nature,
this forceful dislocation
of the delicate web of mysteries,
the stabilising forces, 951

this shattering of the old harmony
between Nature the Mother
and her hapless progeny generates
total fratricidal strife, 952

releases the long secreted lava,
the lethal malignance,
the rumbustious and ruinous sequences
of attack and reprisal. 953

Who kills or commits an atrocity
often escapes punishment,
and the injured in their screech of frenzy
turn against the innocent. 954

A wicked logic of association
 upholds the cheap transference
 of guilt from father to son or the clan
 or the tribe or the nation. 955

The human oft turns doabolical
 o'erreaching the dizzy heights
 of the Asuric, the stark bestial
 or sheerly anti-divine. 956

And dazzled by the snap success, the splash
 of glory and the strange lure.
 of charisma, a whole world's obeisance
 kow-tows to the Asura. 957

But adulation fuels arrogance,
 and in the competing craze
 for idolatry, a random false jerk
 shows the Hero's feet of clay. 958

And then a miscellany of idlers
 or a mob of malcontents
 may seize the lethal moment and fan out
 their undisciplined marches. 959

In the ensuing mad conflagration,
 with the flames leaping, clawing,
 raising clouds of smoke to blot out the sky,
 the roofs crack and crash below. 960

Roving clusters of alienated youths
 with a perpetual howl
 on their faces canter into the fray
 and caper about madly. 961

And there's promiscuous loot and arson,
 the half-demented thugs howl
 and scream and terrorise women, children,
 and the aged and the meek. 962

What's the nexus between the happenings.
 the violence and the waste,
 the uncortrolled fury of the onslaught
 and tally of destruction? 963

Only the blatancy of illogic
 and the cynic negation
 of humanity seem to promulgate
 this cremation devil-dance! 964

Trials and tribulations are many,
 O Maithili, for we're dogged
 by the unpredictable, and must walk
 warily and wait on hope. 965

Once as I felt entrapped in the Dark Night
 of the Soul and lay resigned
 to my fate, dazzlingly I was vouchsafed
 a vision splendid and rare. 966

'Twas the stairway of the worlds, and between
 the Dark below and the Light
 above, the steps of descent seemed the same
 as the steep rungs of ascent 967

It but called for a firm decisive twist
 in direction, and the Dark
 and Death were left behind, and Light and Life
 streamed down in torrents of Love. 968

And I saw that not aggression but love,
 not seizure but surrender,
 held the key to communion with Nature
 and the sovereignty within. 969

But Sita, I've read the apocalypse
 and seen you as the Mother,
 the Grace that can annul all excrescence
 and ordain the last breakthrough. 970

And when self-driven by his ambition
 Man lands himself on the brink,
 then will your Grace, O Mother, intervene
 and effect the retrieval." 971

Hearkening to Trijata's impassioned
 recital of a future
 of such distorted physiognomy,
 Sita hardly understood, 972

for the intolerable interim
 and the suspense and vigil
 were weighing heavily upon her soul
 and exhausting her reserves. 973

But she had also registered the drift
 of Trijata's projections,
 the revolt against Nature the Mother
 and Man's purblind self-slaughter. 974

Meeting her loving and reverent gaze

Sita smiled as she answered:

“These are feverish fancies, Trijata,
and spring out of the present.

975

And I must plead stranger to the Power

and the Grace you see in me:

I only want this grim suspense to end
and see Raghava again.”

976

And even as she let her meaning sink

into the inner silence

where soul communes with soul, the two were jerked
out of the reigning stillness.

977

The battlefield was hotting up once more,

and the reverberations

with their charge of sound and fury impinged
on Sita and Trijata.

978

Canto 55: **Ravana's End**

Maithili wore a sudden startled look,
and as if stung Trijata
flared up, her eyes glowing like coals of fire,
her body a swaying leaf. 979

"I see the red glow of the holocaust
redder than the rising Sun,"
cried Trijata in infectious distress;
"more oblations in the fire! 980

Ravana has now combed out of the homes
the residual recruits
and rushed them to the front to give battle,
and kill — or get sacrificed. 981

I see hectic fighting and hear the shouts,
and Rama's Gandharva shafts
cause the confusion of countless Ramas
mowing the Rakshasas down. 982

And Raghava is deadly though unseen,
like a hurricane that sweeps
over the forest uprooting the trees
and leaving it a shambles. 983

I now hear the strains of lamentation
in Lanka's homes and mainstreets,
I hear the bereaved raising their voices
against the accursed King: 984

"Twas wrong to lust after another's wife,
and Sita is Ravana's
nemesis for all past sins, and Rama
is Rudra the Destroyer. 985

The King did wrong to spurn Vibhishana,
and now there's dole in Lanka . . .'
I see and hear the breast-beatings and cries
of the Rakshasa women." 986

After a pause, Trijata continued:
"I see the terror-striking
Ravana at the head of his army,
determined to Do or Die. 987

With him Virupaksha, Mahaparsva
 and the remnant warriors
 driven by compulsive fate and greeted
 by unbecoming portents. 988

The risen Sun looks pale, the horses trip,
 the vultures circle above,
 the jackals howl, the owls screech, Ravana's
 left eye throbs, his right arm shakes. 989

In a conflict marked by vicissitudes
 I see a vast commotion
 but no clarity: strike and counter-strike,
 and darts meeting rocks and trees! 990

There, there, Sugriva slays Virupaksha,
 and intrepid Angada
 lays low Mahaparsva, and Ravana
 fumes and resolves on revenge. 991

There I see the Warrior-King approach
 the royal Brothers at last,
 as menacing as the serpent Rahu
 shadowing the Sun and Moon. 992

I feel dazed by the monumental clash
 of Ravana with Rama,
 aye mighty opposites, verily like
 Yama ranged against Rudra. 993

Ravana's *asura* warhead is met
 by Rama's Agni-charged one,
 and likewise the Maya-missile is cut
 by the fell Gandharva-dart. 994

Oh I see my Father slay his brother
 Ravana's horses; I see
 Lakshmana face Ravana's vengeful wrath,
 and I see Saumitri's fall . . . 995

Leaving his brother to the Vanaras'
 care, Rama now fully roused
 releases lethal darts at Ravana
 who flees the field in panic. 996

My eyes grow dim, I see Rama weeping
 by prostrate Lakshmana's side:
 but all's not lost, for Hanuman has brought
 the hill of rare healing herbs. 997

Sushena crushes the *Sanjivini*
 and the other wonder-herbs,
 and a sniff cures Saumitri of his wounds
 and he bounces back to health. 998

And Ravana has now returned refreshed:
 the fight is resumed, and his
 serpent-dart is cut by the eagle-shaft,
 and grim uncertainty reigns. 999

Ravana's killer-spear, charged with thunder,
 is turned back by Raghava's
 infallible javelin, and his fell darts
 overwhelm the Rakshasa. 1000

And I hear Rama's words of impeachment:
 'You're not Hero or Fighter;
 only coward-thief of another's wife!
 Now's your time of chastisement!' 1001

Then, with a redoubled fury of speed,
 Ravana's warheads make their hits,
 and when Ravana grows dizzy, Suta
 pulls back the King's chariot. 1002

But as Ravana resents the retreat,
 Suta drives back to the front,
 and ready for battle, the Rakshasa
 sees Rama poised for the fray. 1003

But oh this blaze of advancing glory:
 Sage Agastya approaches
 pensive Rama, and now initiates him
 into the Heart of the Sun: 1004

'Rama my child! I give you the solvent
 of evil and anxiety,
 the supreme key to victory in war
 over all your enemies. 1005

Make obeisance to the world's Lord, the Sun;
 infinite his wealth of rays;
 he's the radiant heart of the universe,
 and he's Father of the Day. 1006

He's the bestower of beneficence,
 he's the doom of everything,
 and he's the resurrection of all things,
 he's the great Illuminant! 1007

He's light at the core of the golden-hued
 universe; the cooling strength
 and the burning rage at the heart of all;
 the source of phosphorescence. 1008

He's Lord of the Sky, splitter of darkness,
 mother of downpour of rains;
 master of Rig-Sama-Yajur Vedas;
 the Bard of all the Sastras. 1009

While the world's living creatures are asleep,
 he doesn't fail to keep awake
 as the pervasive Light of everything,
 the supreme indwelling Soul. 1010

He's alone the Priest of the Sacrifice;
 he's also the Destroyer
 of the fruits of the Sacrifice; and he's
 subject and object in one. 1011

With a shining singleness of purpose,
 O Rama, meditate on
 the Sun who is the God of all the gods,
 the Ruler of all the worlds. 1012

Strong-handed Rama! this very instant
 you will destroy Ravana!
 Having said these words, Rishi Agastya
 hurries back the way he came. 1013

Feeling fulfilled and carefree on receipt
 of the ambrosial secret,
 Rama of the great effulgence, his mind
 'ecalmed, communes with the Sun. 1014

The Sun-God too, backgrounded by the stars,
 views Rama with love and joy,
 and exhorts him 'Hurry up!' — for the hour
 of reckoning has arrived. 1015

With a flourish it begins, the battle
 of the rival chariots:
 while Suta leads Ravana's, Matali —
 loaned by Indra — steers Rama's. 1016

The army on either side, and Devas
 and Asuras from above:
 all watch intently the struggle with its
 cosmic ramifications. 1017

Yet once more, the opposing portents flash
 presaging coming events :
 defeat and destruction for Ravana,
 and victory for Rama. 1018

Maithili, this is more than I can stand,
 for at the war theatre
 the earth seems to shake like a rolling ball,
 and all the elements clash. 1019

What's this: are the worlds in dissolution?
 No, no, Sita, my senses
 fail, my mind's in a haze of confusion,
 I can neither see nor hear." 1020

Like one almost bewitched, Sita had been
 following the battle-scenes
 as uncannily seen and projected
 by clairvoyant Trijata. 1021

Between the din and fury at the front
 and the quiet of the Grove,
 Trijata was the psychic medium
 linking the extremities. 1022

While she reported — and almost re-lived
 what she saw and heard, Sita
 ranged over the whole gamut of heaven
 and hell, and the realm between. 1023

Now Trijata had lapsed into a trance,
 and as the minutes flew past,
 Maithili was a prey to anxiety
 and was clawed by impatience. 1024

They were both unexcelled fighters she knew,
 but Ravana might descend
 to stratagems, deceit and sorcery —
 and would Rama hold his own? 1025

The great Sun's magisterial progress
 in the sky was being matched,
 she hoped, by Rama's clear ascendancy
 o'er the desperate Titan. 1026

There were certain unique phenomena:
 the Sun, the Sky, the Ocean;
 what could they be compared with, Sita asked,
 except the Sun, Sky, Ocean? 1027

So too, perhaps, Maithili told herself,
 the Rama-Ravana war,
 as the clash was then unfolding itself,
 must transcend all parallels. 1028

A terrible clanging sound, with its deep
 reverberations, awoke
 Trijata from her swoon of consciousness,
 and she found her voice again: 1029

“Oh Sita, this dust-raising, eye-blinding,
 war of total attrition:
 the lion-hearted fighters raise whirlwinds,
 and vultures hover above. 1030

The destined opposites face each other
 like Ignorance and Knowledge,
 Evil and Good, *adharma* and *dharma*,
 the serpent and the eagle, 1031

Or even like the proverbial mammoths
 mighty and formidable
 all ready for a definitive clash
 of wills, limbs and momentums. 1032

Ravana aims at Rama's flag, misses
 the target, and in reply
 Raghava's unerring missile knocks down
 the mighty Rakshasa's flag. 1033

With a heightened tempo of ruthlessness
 the dread Prince of Ayodhya
 and the desperate Ruler of Lanka
 exchange hits and counter-hits. 1034

The resounding crash, Sita, didn't you hear?
 Slashed by Raghava's sharp dart,
 see Ravana's head with its ear-pendants
 fall on the embattled ground! 1035

But wonder of wonders: another head
 springs up, and that's whipped off too –
 and another, another — the sprouting
 and the slash, and on and on . . . 1036

Is it illusion? Supernatural
 intrusion? mumbo jumbo?
 Head after head, and exactly alike,
 springs up — is cut off — and falls! 1037

As though all future hangs on the issue
of the struggle in progress,
the guardians of the sky and all the worlds
seem racked with uncertainty. 1038

Anxious and apprehensive, Matali
the seasoned charioteer
advises Rama to end the impasse
by using the Brahma-shaft. 1039

With a decisive gesture of his head
Rama takes from his quiver
the missile Sage Agastya had given,
the weapon infallible. 1040

The sum of elemental energies,
invisible potencies –
I see cataclysmic conflagrations
held in its atomic space 1041

alas Sita, I see far far beyond
this current envenomed time,
and I'm frightened, and I can understand
Raghava's hesitation. 1042

In future time, should any other than
the Divine in human garb
get hold of such primordial power,
woe unto our wounded Earth! 1043

But faced by Ravana's attritional
repetitive act, Rama
sees the wisdom of Matali's advice
and decides to use the shaft. 1044

In his grip, the Brahma-warhead is fierce
and beautiful and baneful,
a knot of serpents, poisonous, deadly,
a kill-power infinite! 1045

Radiant like the Sun, it emits fumes
from hell, no airs from heaven;
its packaged light and heat are but baleful
fire and smoke and instant death. 1046

I see Rama release the fateful dart;
it is now beyond recall:
it speeds with the wild wind's velocity
and pierces Ravana's heart. 1047

And from the Rakshasa King's inert hand
 his bow and arrow fall down,
 and his massive body, now tenantless,
 lies spread out on the bare ground. 1048

That huge and formidable container
 of occult Asuric force,
 that vicious accumulated credit
 of long spells of *tapasya*, 1049

that preposterous ego-explosion
 of mindless Rakshasa might,
 that heartless hedonist of the senses
 with a body of granite: 1050

when at last, Rama's shaft found its target,
 the occult spirit withdrew,
 quenched was that dynamo of negation,
 and its power petered out. 1051

It is over, Sita, the sacrifice;
 the deceitful King is dead;
 and the shaft, with blood dripping still, flies back
 to rest in Rama's quiver. 1052

I scent the sense of relief and the leap
 of joy in Sugriva's ranks,
 and the chill of final defeat driving
 the losers back to Lanka. 1053

It's as I dreamt that fateful morning when
 Ravana menaced you here:
 and Sita, this katharsis has to be,
 all the terror and pity." 1054

Sita remembered all, understood all,
 and her joy was almost tinged
 with sadness, and she embraced Trijata
 in a rush of gratitude. 1055

BOOK SIX

RAJYA

Canto 56: War and Peace

- The noise of battle rumbled no longer,
and the pulse of peace was heard
once more in Lanka's homes, bylanes, mainstreets
and the wide spaces beyond. 1
- Peace, peace, the peace of the grave in Lanka;
and peace at what cost, wondered
Sita in her stance of stillness; peace, peace--
but why this late holocaust? 2
- Ravana dead and fallen on the earth,
the self-inflated titan
answering with his pampered body's death
his ego's foul transgressions! 3
- Her own agonies sprawled over a year
seemed a thing of no account
weighed against the sum of feminine tears
flooding Lanka's murning homes. 4
- Her heart went out to the tens of thousands
of mothers, sisters, daughters.
and most of all, the wretched wives now left
to stew in their misery. 5
- She viewed from a distance the hesitant
movements of the wardresses,
with their cocky aggressive air all gone,
and now furtive and frightened. 6
- "Oh the whirligig of Time!" mused Si'a,
"the teasing alternations,
the cycle of foul and fair, the tally
of rebuffs and revenges! 7
- She could hardly fail to recall the face
of Mandodari the Queen
whose heart of compassion seemed to exceed
her adhesion to her Lord! 8
- Sita thought of the bevy of consorts,
the dazzling train of beauties
dutifully following Ravana
when he raided her presence. 9

Hadn't she seen through all that blinding display
 and show of gaiety, and found
 a deep concern, a sense of shame and hurt,
 and a tragic helplessness? 10

When homicidal Ravana, driven
 by foiled lust and sudden rage,
 made that insane movement as if he could
 attack and kill her indeed, 11

hadn't the seductive Dhanyamalini,
 on a peremptory nod
 from Mandodari, lured the King away
 with the splash of her own charm? 12

Maithili's heart warmed up in gratitude,
 and there surged an infinite
 sadness at the thought of the void reigning
 in the hearts of the consorts. 13

And now that stab of remembrance again!
 After Ravana had gone,
 the wardresses had teased and taunted and
 threatened her with instant death. 14

She had then clutched the Simsupa branch, felt
 grim desolation's taste, and
 desperately thought of suicide, and
 driven herself to the brink. 15

But alas! before all changed suddenly
 with the crowding good omens
 and Trijata's visions, Sita had cursed
 Lanka's homesteads with dolour. 16

No, no, Sita quickly assured herself;
 not her impulsive cursing
 but Ravana's sustained evil-doing
 engineered Lanka's defeat. 17

The iron wheels of the Law of Karma
 ground slowly but ruthlessly,
 and purblind Ravana had trapped himself
 in his own self-deceptions. 18

And yet, Sita asked herself, was it fair
 the sins of fathers should be
 visited on their children, and of Kings
 on the blameless citizens? 19

The complex of Karma and consequence
 seemed riddled with the unknown
 imponderables that were too many
 and involved too long a span. 20

Somebody's sinful act of long ago,
 some vicious twist of the mind,
 some infection of the glassy essence
 the soul, some atomic flaw: 21

and once the much delayed reckoning starts,
 how fast the chain-reaction,
 how promiscuous the devastation,
 how messed up the accounting! 22

The world was doubtless built on a logic
 of facts and transcendences,
 and without a deep causal equation
 the whole symphony must crack. 23

But the human mind, the human senses,
 operate but in shackles,
 and the near seems to annul the distant,
 and the worse seems the better. 24

Maithili called to mind her dear mother
 the gentle Sunayana
 warning her against summary judgements
 in terms of evil and good. 25

We see a little patch in some disturbed
 moment in the flux of time,
 and hasten to confer autonomy
 on a local distortion. 26

'Twas no use, Sita concluded, looking
 for the payment of a sin,
 for nothing is, in fact, isolable
 and all is lost in the mists. 27

For, almost a year, Ravana had loomed
 in her besieged consciousness
 as a sinister engine of evil,
 a termless malignancy. 28

In his pursuit of power for *preyas*
 and total security,
 he had let himself be trapped by his pride,
 vanity and self-deceit. 29

- But now that he lay dead on the bare earth
 pierced by Rama's avenging
 irresistible dart, her resentment
 and revulsion were ended, 30
- and from her mother-heart of compassion
 restorative vibrations
 went forth to assuage the sharp pain of all
 the bereaved ones in Lanka. 31
- And she marvelled at Trijata's humped pose
 of vast immobility:
 what was she thinking after these last hours
 of passion and prophecy? 32
- The holocaust before Lanka City,
 the cauldrons of suffering
 that the once happy homes had now become,
 the plight of Vibhishana! 33
- The easy slothful way invites at once,
 the primrose path of *preyas*;
 but it's the steep and thorny ascent leads
 to the summits of *sreyas*. 34
- Vibhishana made the difficult choice
 and dared to go his own way,
 face all opprobrium and abandon
 King and country and kindred. 35
- For Sarama, Anala, Trijata,
 the interim was a rack:
 they were on Raghava's side, and they lived
 amidst his sworn enemies. 36
- In this grim predicament, flesh and blood
 were riven within, they found
 victory in defeat, the supreme Yea
 in the immediate Nay. 37
- The higher call once heard must be heeded,
 and not all the hucksterings
 of the market-place of calculation
 can silence the soul's summons. 38
- This was how, Sita reminded herself,
 Raghava heroically
 opted for an exile's life, rejecting
 the trappings of royalty. 39

And when of her own will for her own good
 she had trailed behind her Lord,
 the rarer action had been Saumitri's,
 and darling Urmila's too! 40

While her surface consciousness was thus rife
 with criss-crossing thought-currents,
 her deeper self in the trance of waiting
 thirsted for Rama's coming. 41

The conquest of Ravana accomplished,
 battle-scarred though he might be,
 wouldn't Rama cast all considerations
 aside and rush to meet her? 42

As the dreary minutes passed, the eerie
 stillness deepened yet further,
 and Sita — her Witness Self uninvolved —
 could watch her thoughts come and go. 43

If only that stony silence would end!
 and sphinx-like Trijata speak!
 or Sarama or Anala return!
 or Rama himself perhaps . . . 44

Canto 57: **Mandodari's Lament**

There was the bustle of advancing steps,
and Marthili felt keyed up
in anticipation, and Trijata
opened her dolorous eyes. 45

Anala's face showed signs of strain as she
turned first with a meaningful
look to Trijata, then sat down before
Sita, and spoke evenly: 46

"Death has made his assignation at last
with the mighty Rakshasa,
for Rama's infallible Brahma-dart
has ended Ravana's life. 47

While the rival armies predictably
responded with shouts of joy
or poignant cries, Vibhishana broke down
rushing to his brother's side: 48

'Alas my King and valiant Brother!
What I feared has become true:
the wrong turn once taken, you persisted
in your doomed suicidal course. 49

And like you, the others too — Prahasta,
Indrajit, Makaraksha —
were blinded by pride and the delusion
of invincibility. 50

The doughty warrior, the mighty tree,
the adept in Vedic chants,
the admired exemplar of admirers,
brought low by the Prince of Men! 51

Marking my Father's visible distress
and conflict of emotions,
Rama said soothingly: 'No room for tears,
for he died a warrior. 52

In the heat and dust of battle, defeat
and victory are alike
on the cards: what matters is the mettle,
the courage to do or die. 53

Supreme among fighters, Ravana has
 covered himself with glory,
 for he showed no signs of fear till the last,
 and he died a hero still. 54

Ravana's wrongs are annulled in his death,
 and all enmities must cease;
 it's now proper, Vibhishana, you should
 attend to his obsequies.' 55

Meantime poured out of Lanka's central gate
 the bereaved Mandodari,
 her companions in distress, and other
 sorrow-stricken Rakshasis. 56

It was a sight most piteous to behold
 with the severed ones seeking
 their respective spouses and giving vent
 to their wild lamentations. 57

And Ravana's Queen hastened to his side
 as he lay mountain-massive, —
 a resplendent heap of collyrium, —
 and wept unreservedly: 58

'O mightiest of heroes, if only
 you had heeded the advice
 of Vibhishana and returned Sita,
 this disaster needn't have been. 59

And so recently when, after the first
 encounter Rama gave you
 a reprieve letting you retire and rest
 and re-think your ends and means, 60

you were vouchsafed that nightmare dream-sequence,
 both Sulochana and I
 made our fervent and pressing pleas for peace
 for Lanka's sake and your own, 61

you wouldn't listen, my Lord, you persisted
 on the sure road to ruin,
 and so many have now been abandoned
 to the night of misery. 62

But no use repining, lover and Lord,
 it's the handiwork of fate;
 we're but wretched thistledowns caught and crushed
 by remorseless destiny!' 63

- For a time Mandodari sat apart
 imaging desolation
 as she viewed the majestic Ravana
 lying prone and tenantless. 64
- It was the turn of the other consorts,
 the bereaved and the widowed,
 to give free vent to their suppressed feelings
 and swell the lamentation. 65
- When exhausted they became dumb with grief,
 Mandodari wailed again:
 'The unconquerable is now laid low
 by a woodland wanderer! 66
- When he destroyed Khara's fourteen thousand,
 I thought he was more than Man;
 when his envoy laid waste our Asoka,
 my suspicions were confirmed; 67
- and when his mere monkeys made the causeway
 across the sea, I was sure
 Raghava was the primordial Power
 come in the form of a man. 68
- Mastering your senses through askesis
 you were the Lord of the worlds,
 but surrendering to your lust, you have
 let Namesis o'ertake you! 69
- Resorting to fraud, magic and disguise
 you brought the chaste Sita here –
 alas, you lie dead now, burnt by the fire
 of a pure wife's suffering. 70
- Your mindless obsession with Maithili
 has dragged you to dreaded death;
 and where am I – Ravana's Queen, Maya's
 daughter, Indrajit's mother? 71
- Goodbye to my pride and my happiness!
 When my brave Indrajit fell
 I had you still, but now nothing is left
 but dust and ashes and tears. 72
- See, see these charmers of your gynaeceum
 weep unveiled around your corse:
 how many of them had you not wrested
 from their fathers or husbands? 73

And the worst of transgressions was stealing
 the defenceless Maithili: •
 never a coward soul, yet you seized her
 doubling deceit with disguise. 74

Could you not have hearkened to the frank words
 of the wise Vibhishana,
 and Maricha, Malayavan, and my
 father and your own mother! 75

I cannot believe, O lord of Lanka,
 that your race is run indeed:
 and while I see the crash of all my hopes,
 my heart grinds not to a halt! 76

Thus the angelic and distracted Queen,
 the flame-like Mandodari;
 and now she swooned drained of all strength, and shone
 like lightning among the clouds. 77

Then my Father, as advised by Rama,
 overcame his reluctance
 and performed with all due solemnity
 the late King's funeral rites. 78

The ritual appropriate to Kings
 was followed, and my Father
 lit the pyre, and bathed, and made oblations,
 and bowed to the departed. 79

The inconsolable Mandodari
 and the other tearful ones,
 on Vibhishana's gentle suggestion,
 went back sadly to Lanka." 80

When Anala was thus recapturing
 the melting predicament
 of Mandodari's passion and probings,
 wisdom and womanliness, 81

Maithili's bruised heart beat in response,
 and once more she remembered
 the spontaneous gesture in Asoka
 that saved her honour and life. 82

As her mind lingered on the fickleness
 of fortune, the vagaries
 of power, Sita felt inclined to take
 a wide panoramic view. 83

The local irritants seemed to coalesce
 into a symphonic whole,
 but then the pressures of the passing hour
 could cloud the sweeping vision! 84

With an effort Sita stilled these musings,
 and returning Trijata's
 affectionate gaze, grew more attentive,
 and followed Anala's speech : 85

"And so, Sita, after Mandodari
 and the gynaeceum inmates,
 now half-reconciled to their bereavement,
 had returned to the city, 86

Rama asked Saumitri to take prompt steps
 to have Vibhishana crowned
 as Lanka's new lawful King, invested
 with his late Brother's powers. 87

Presently the age-old ceremony
 of coronation took place
 in Lanka, though with muted rejoicings
 and in quite subdued colours. 88

For the doleful citizens of Lanka
 this is a fresh beginning,
 and the process of new life thus switched on,
 the old wounds will heal anon. 89

But my father the King went back at once
 to the camp outside Lanka
 to rejoin Rama and look to his needs;
 and I've rushed here to report." 90

Canto 58: Rejection of Sita

Sita slowly registered the impact
of Anala's recital,
yet the delay in reunion pained her,
for the moments seemed to crawl. 91

Just then, breaking the silence and slow time,
magnificent Hanuman,
radiant with happiness, came in haste
and made obeisance to her. 92

Then, rising, he stood respectful, silent;
she looked transfigured with joy;
now, as coming from her Lord, this message
of sheer ambrosial import: 93

"Devi! Rama sends word that all is well;
Ravana is dead. Lanka
now ruled by Vibhishana is no more
your stifling prison, but home. 94

All this has become possible because
of Lakshmana, Sugriva
and his Vanaras, and Vibhishana:
gone is the load of your grief." 95

This shower of rejuvenating rain
gave her a new lease of life
and buoyed up by her feel of fulfilment
Sita knew not what to say. 96

Soon, however, she recovered her poise
and said sweetly: "O bringer
of good news, how can I thank you enough,
for poor is all the world's wealth!" 97

Hanuman said: "These simple words of yours
far exceed whole heaps of gems;
and Rama's victory gives me more joy
than all heaven's sovereignty." 98

Sita quickly responded: "Hanuman,
conjunction of all virtues!
You are brave in action and wise in speech,
you're virtue, knowledge, prowess." 99

Gratified as well as stimulated,

Maruti said suddenly:

"Let me kill the ogresses, Vaidehi,
who terrorised you before."

100

Sita answered: "It's not wise to give way

to anger: these wardresses

but obeyed their Master, and Ravana

has gone the way of all flesh.

101

Nay more: even evil isn't to be met

by evil, — only by good;

as for these guilty ones, is there any

who has never done a wrong?"

102

Praising her charity, Hanuman asked

for her message to Rama;

she said succinctly, "I have no wish but

to see my husband again."

103

"You will see him indeed," said Hanuman

with alacrity; "You'll see

the moon-splendoured Rama and Saumitri!"

And he sped back to the camp.

104

The late afternoon stillness of the next

few minutes sustained a stab

when Trijata, inscrutable so long,

gave out a sepulchral moan.

105

It was unearthly, and seemed to be wrung

from the soul's deep recesses,

trailing intimations of suffering

of a phenomenal cast.

106

Anala was shaken within, and rushed

to her ailing sister's side,

for the cry was like that of a song-bird

struck by an envenomed shaft.

107

As if collecting herself, Trijata

wearily exclaimed: "Let be —

it may be nothing, but I scent something;

may the Lord protect us all!"

108

In sharp reaction, a passing tremor

shook frail Maithili as well;

she swayed visibly, she turned yet paler,

and she faltered in her speech:

109

- “Trijata, Anala, what does it mean?
My mind misgives, my right eye
throbs, my right arm twitches, birds fly above,
and lack-lustre is the Sun” 110
- Why, oh why doesn't Rama come to claim me,
clasp me, carry me away?
Are these miserable months of waiting
and languishing not enough?” 111
- Anala looked helpless and woebegone,
and Trijata stared and stared,
made an effort to speak, then changed her mind.
and cast a motherly look. 112
- It was like a week or month of waiting,
and the nearby silent tarn
seemed agitated when even a leaf
fell or a lone sparrow flew. 113
- Now once more a brilliant flash at the gate,
and flourish, and the stately
tread of advancing steps – Vibhishana
in purple stood before her. 114
- And Sarama, now Queen but little changed,
advanced towards Maithili,
and taking her hands with love and longing,
spoke on behalf of the King: 115
- “Long-suffering Sita, the time has come
for reunion with Rama,
and I'll now take you to the gynaeceum,
and bathe, clothe and perfume you: 116
- and when you are thus renewed and refreshed,
you'll go in a palanquin
followed by us all to meet Raghava
• who is eager to see you.” 117
- Like a doe startled out of its retreat,
• the disturbed Janaki said:
“Let me see my dear Lord just as I am,
O King; I'll bathe afterward.” 118
- Nonplussed Vibhishana made obeisance
and spoke deferentially:
“Devi! it would be better to abide
by your husband's instructions.” 119

While anxious Anala gazed at Sita
 with a reassuring look,
 Trijata — in the grip of her passion
 once more — spoke witheringly: 120

“Father, father, what means this rigmarole
 of bathing and perfuming?
 As if Maithili, unkempt as she is,
 isn’t Grace and Glory supreme? 121

O my Father, my seeing inner eye
 feels sore and apprehensive;
 and O Goddess, my daughter, my Sita,
 may the Elements shield you!” 122

The words hardly left her mouth when she slumped
 and fell in a heap before
 her father the King, and a fit seized her
 and she trembled like a leaf. 123

But Maithili, collecting herself, said:
 “So be it, King; I’ll follow
 the good Queen, and do what Rama desires.
 Rise, Trijata, I’m going.” 124

The words like a mantra coursed through her veins,
 and Trijata opened wide
 her deep eyes of concern and compassion,
 and muttered, “Godspeed, my child!” 125

Sarama now took care of Maithili,
 and bathed and clothed and groomed her,
 aye, with dazzling raiment and jewellery,
 and conveyed her to the camp. 126

As the palanquin, with its bright hangings,
 was being carried, long rows
 of viewers — Vanaras and Rakshasas —
 lined the pathway on both sides. 127

Lest the curious or admiring gaze
 of the serried spectators
 should embarrass or inconvenience
 Sita — or even Rama — 128

Vibhishana tried to clear the approach
 by shoving them all aside,
 but in a sudden upsurge of temper
 Rama raged against the King: 129

“Let them remain! What safeguards a woman?

Not the veil, nor the tower,
nor sentries, nor bodyguard, but alone
her soul's strength, her sole armour! 130

Where's the harm in a woman being seen
by people in the public?
The rule of propriety is determined
by the play of circumstance. 131

It is said necessity knows no law;
this war was on her account,
and surely she may be seen by others;
and I'm here too, after all.” 132

And so Sita went to meet her husband
in the glare of public gaze,
and none, none could withstand Rama's temper;
and shamed Sita shrank within. 133

Then, walking up to him, she spoke the word
as of old, ‘Aryaputra!’
that was rich with infinite suggestion;
she could speak no more, and wept. 134

For sometime past, Rama's mind, heart and soul
had been under a grim siege
of conflicting and chaotic feelings,
thoughts, passions, lacerations. 135

He was glad, angry, wild, miserable
by turns or at the same time,
and it was as though he had trapped himself
in an insurrection's coils. 136

The melting sight of Maithili, standing
as though nude, vulnerable
and abandoned amid a curious
assortment of bystanders, 137

far from rousing his manliness and pride
and protective sovereignty,
only made him seem callous and cruel,
or at best indifferent. 138

While for a mere instant, Raghava's face
seen after such a long time—
lighted up her own into the splendour
of the radiant full Moon, 139

this was instantaneously extinguished
 by the harsh neutrality
 on his face changing fast into anger
 and exploding through his words: 140

“I’ve killed Ravana in battle, thereby
 avenging the injury
 and insult he caused me by carrying
 you away in my absence. 141

My achievement has been made possible
 because of Hanuman’s flight
 to Lanka, and the help I’ve received from
 Sugriva, Vibhishana . . .” 142

The cold words of pride and prosaic statement,
 the forbidding frown and stare,
 the crude heavy tone of self-righteousness
 made Sita all but crumble. 143

Unmindful or unconscious of the fact
 the Vanaras and Titans,
 two whole armies, were then looking aghast,
 Rama went on with his speech: 144

“Not for your sake, woman, this war was fought,
 ’twas to redeem my honour’
 but I can’t take you back, for your sight hurts
 as light pains a diseased eye. 145

When you had perforce to live in his place,
 Ravana couldn’t have left you
 undefiled, since you are so beautiful
 and hence so desirable. 146

All the glory of pristine womanhood,
 all the grace of purity,
 perfection, all the fire of the true wife,
 all have taken leave of you. 147

You’ve shown indeed you’re not of noble birth:
 Janaka found you only
 in a furrow of the Videhan earth
 and reared you up as his child. 148

Deem yourself free to find a protector
 in Bharata, Lakshmana,
 Sugriva, Vibhishana or any
 other, and do what you please.” 149

Canto 59: Sita's Fire-Baptism

Rama's words, like poisoned darts, pierced Sita
with pitiless aim and sting,
and this at the very time she needed
soothing and endearing speech. 150

As the mindless words made her writhe within,
her eyes streaming forth hot tears,
Rama's face blazed like escalating fire
kindled by a rain of ghees. 151

She underwent intolerable pain
like a poor fluttering bird
whose deep wound is being wantonly probed
by an insensitive nail. 152

Yea, she was a creeper trampled upon
by an elephant in rut,
and 'twas heartless indeed that he had raved
in the midst of so many. 153

Unendurable were the agonies
unleashed by the verbal cuts
and stabbings, and the roots of her being
felt a sense of hurt and shame. 154

Then, reviving with a supreme effort,
wiping the tears from her face
and breaking the tense unearthly silence,
she found the apt words to say. 155

"You are famed as the heroic hero,
yet you deploy the crudeness
of speech of one of the commonest kind
to a female of his sort. 156

Aryaputra, — or what should I call you? —
I'm other than what you think,
and you're wrong to condemn all womankind
just because a few are flawed. 157

Is it fair to brand me faithless because
a villain seized me by force?
I was helpless, but my heart was still mine;
'twas wholly centered in you. 158

When your emissary, Maruti, came,
 he observed my withered state,
 my plight as a prisoner of sorrow,
 my proximity to death. 159

On his return, didn't he make fair report
 of my vast tribulations?
 Now this to me, this flint-hearted response!
 My *tapas* has been in vain. 160

You boast that for the honour of your name
 you waged this much-ado-war,
 and choose to arraign me, your wedded wife,
 before these warrior hosts. 161

Not as the Archer who split Shiva's Bow
 and won Vaidehi for wife
 but as the yokel that cast out a Pearl
 you'll now live in history. 162

Our happy years together are nothing,
 your green eye is everything!
 Why, why didn't you send word through Maruti
 that you wouldn't receive me back? 163

Then at least I could have ended my life
 before the Envoy's own eyes
 and thereby spared you and your worthy friends
 the exertions of this war. 164

They call you rightly Tiger among Men,
 but hasn't your hasty anger
 blurred your vision and made you madly speak
 of me as though I'm garbage. 165

Janaka found me, and I'm his daughter;
 but remember, O Hero,
 my immaculate advent was the gift
 of the hallowed Earth-Mother. 166

Surely you've forgotten the sacrament
 of our marriage years ago,
 and the bliss of sanctified wedded life
 in both city and forest. 167

And Aryaputra, at this grim moment
 when I'm perched near the abyss,
 it's not my present shame and suffering
 that I take to heart so much, 168

but rather the certainty that by this
 one squeak of aberration
 you will be held up to opprobrium
 for all the ages to come. 169

Obscuring your countless acts of valour
 and uncanny righteousness,
 this cardinal and cruel rejection
 of your lawful loyal wife 170

will in all future time set the pattern
 of vulgar, selfish, prideful,
 one-sided, pitiless desecration
 of supportless womankind. 171

Denied by my husband, where can I go?
 with this charge of falsity
 mounted by green-eyed jealousy, how can
 I live or *live* for myself . . . 172

She paused for a while to control her tears,
 then turned to paled Saumitri:
 "Make a funeral pyre at once, my son:
 I have no desire to live." 173

Observing no hint of a change of heart
 on the set face of Rama,
 the miserable Lakshmana prepared
 a cauldron of blazing fire. 174

Not a feeling eye in that vast concourse
 but was blind with flowing tears;
 Anala cried in distress, Sarama
 screamed and fell down in a swoon. 175

And Trijata peered into the farthest
 distance, saw fire and brimstone,
 gave a wild and piteous howl of protest
 and spoke bitter winged words: 176

"Is there none here to rush to the rescue
 of abandoned innocence?
 Must the world reap the wages of the sin
 of driving the pure to die?" 177

When the echoes of the prophetic words
 lost themselves in the stillness
 more chilly than before, the terrible
 drama enacted itself. 178

- Wasting no time and with calm assurance
she circumambulated
her petrified Lord, walked up to the fire
and spoke her mind with joined palms: 179
- “As nothing is hid from the God of Fire,
may he testify my Truth:
if Raghava has misjudged and wronged me,
may I be immune from harm. 180
- If I’ve never strayed in deed, thought or word
from my scriptures of Rama,
if the very Elements know my Faith,
may the Fire-God protect me.” 181
- And calmly going round the altar-blaze
in the poise of submission,
with an incandescent resoluteness
Sita stepped into the fire. 182
- The dread sacrifice drew tears alike from
Vanaras and Rakshasas,
Lakshmana shuddered; and even Rama
felt the touch of tears in things. 183
- That moment torn out of time seemed timeless,
and as the leaping flames hid
the golden glory of Maithili’s form,
Time stood defiantly still. 184
- Something was happening within the closed
universe of Raghava:
its smug stony security was pierced
by the crisp airs from Above. 185
- As Rama, unable to bear the sight
so poignant and so ghastly,
closed his self-accusing eyes, his inner
eye burst open, and he SAW. 186
- What was it but the beginningless One
singing the diapason
of the grand Affirmation of Sita’s
transcendental purity? 187
- The great lord of life and death, the Fire-God,
approaching with Maithili
by his side, seemed to admonish Rama
for his crime and his folly. 188

Was the experienced knowledge and faith
of years to be cast aside
by a morbid clouded moment's upsurge
of distrust and unreason? 189

With the radiance of a thousand Suns,
flame-pure Agni cleansed the mist
of misapprehension and misery,
and the sky cleared once again. 190

Behind Agni loomed the formidable,
immeasurable cosmic
Powers and Emanations, and now all
showered their Grace on Sita 191

In this condition of trance of waiting
and wise receptivity,
Rama had the convulsions of rebirth,
and he woke up with a start. 192

The splendid evening now revealed a scene
that seemed to have been transformed
by power of alchemic agencies.
for Life had chased away Death. 193

Rama saw the blameless stainless Sita
rise out of the glowing fire,
her limbs and raiment wholly unimpaired,
and her grace more gracious still. 194

Like one awakened from sleep, he let slip
the darkened past as one drops
the memory of nightmares, and advanced
to take his God-given wife. 195

For Rama, as for the astonished throng
of Vanaras, Rakshasas,
and the invisible corps of heaven
raptly watching everything, 196

the vision of Sita rising unscathed,
but all the more resplendent
with the grace of goodness and holiness,
came like an Apocalypse. 197

Stepping out of the still effulgent flames
as from the Godavari
after a brief exhilarating plunge,
she saw her lord and husband, 198

- and the serene clarity of the bliss
of the reunion now seemed
an ambrosial beatific vision
cancelling the morbid past. 199
- Seizing her extended hand with a smile
that was clearly tinged with guilt
and perhaps also with a tacitly
shared esoteric secret, 200
- Rama led her with a light springy air
to his camp, and stationed her
by his side as though the eternal Lord
and Spouse were manifest there. 201
- The scene, thus miraculously sea-changed
from a desert of defeat
into a garden in gorgeous springtime,
caused general rejoicing. 202
- The whole assembly, now brought back to life,
saw with reverence and love
the gracious Devi shining like the Sun
and spraying benevolence. 203
- They could see that the terror and pity
of the brutal rejection
coalescing with the grim Ordeal by Fire
had somehow led to this joy. 204
- The late inquisitorial questioning
gave place to wise acceptance,
and Vanara, Rakshasa, felt alike
greatened by the reunion. 205

Canto 60: Air Journey to Ayodhya

Now evening withdrew and night was around,
and Maithili had a word
with her Lord, and on his consenting joined
Sarama and her daughters. 206

Sita's desire to see Mandodari
struck the humane Sarama
as both natural and necessary,
and she took matters in hand. 207

When she had changed to less splendidous clothes
reminiscent of the years
of her forest life, Sita was guided
to Mandodari's chambers. 208

There was young Sulochana too, sad-eyed,
attired in melancholy
and grimly backgrounding the bereaved Queen
and the reigning tragedy. 209

Sita had heard of her from Trijata,
and an instantaneous glance
of recognition and profound accord
was exchanged between the two. 210

Sita now turned from one to another,
and carrying the burden
of the world's accumulated sorrows,
she faced the elder at last. 211

The two exemplary incarnations
of the Blessed Feminine
as chaste wife and infinite sufferance
needed no words to converse. 212

Long they gazed at each other, the creepers
of affinity drew them
closer and closer till Mandodari
could bear it no more and cried: 213

"O Maithili, whom shall we blame but fate?
Why does it seem to give us
everything, and then take back everything:
please the eyes, yet break the heart? 214

I had Maya for father, Ravana
 for husband, and Indrajit
 for son: and here I am, a rubbish heap—
 only mourning becomes me! 215

And I've heard, Sita, poor injured Sita,
 what a heartless reception
 you had from righteous Raghava himself—
 and I had deemed him divine! 216

Woman's love—a mother's, wife's or sister's,
 a daughter's, any woman's—
 by its own law fosters and sustains life,
 but the Male always assails 217

with his pride, ambition, self-righteousness,
 and the woman pays, hapless
 mankind pays, the entire commonwealth pays;
 but woman pays most of all." 218

She stopped rather o'ercome by emotion,
 and Sita managed to say:
 "There are Tatakas and Surpanakhas,
 Mantharas and Kaikeyis: 219

the sinister complex of circumstance,
 and free will and destiny,
 although I've battered my head against it,
 I s thrown me back on my own. 220

Two months ago we met, Mandodari,
 and you saved me then from death
 at Ravana's hands: how can I forget
 your pure heart of compassion! 221

As you and I see it, and others might
 agree, this sanguinary
 war needn't have happened yet who can locate
 where was the start of it all? 222

We look back and back, and view every twist
 and turn n the intricate
 web of causal relationships, until
 we're lost in the labyrinth. 223

Was Kaikeyi the sole initiator
 of our shared tribulations?
 Was it Surpanakha? Was it myself,
 my strange fancy for the deer? 224

Or must we go back to the old scission
 between Deva-Asura,
 Indra-Ravana, and so get submerged
 in the mists of confusion? 225

One word more, O bereaved Mandodari:
 when, rejected by Rama,
 I plunged into the shining waves of fire,
 I felt 'twas the end indeed. 226

Yet fire was cool to me, the tongues of flame
 seemed only to caress me,
 I felt the soothing touch of a mother,
 and lo! I saw my husband. 227

My mountain of misery was annulled
 in a second, but I thought
 of you, and sorrow welled up from the depths,
 and I must see you, I said. 228

Like Mother Earth with her wayward children,
 woman's heart is forbearance,
 fortitude and compassion: O wish me
 godspeed as I row to you." 229

Her eyes misty once more, Mandodari
 said, "O my child, go in peace;
 and I know the good Vibhishana will
 give the healing touch to all." 230

Then Sita walked up to Sulochana,
 and the two exchanged wordless
 messages of mutual forgiveness
 and deeper understanding. 231

As the bereaved one, invaded by peace,
 rose to embrace Maithili,
 their eyes grew dim, and through the film of tears
 they forged their souls' communion. 232

Sita felt that, while nothing was changed, and
 the pall o'er Lanka remained,
 she could still scent a qualitative change
 presaging a brighter day. 233

At Sarama's mansion where Trijata
 was anxiously awaiting
 Sita's coming, there was witnessed a scene
 prophetic and disturbing. 234

While Anala looked relaxed and happy
 that all was well, her sister
 went into a trance once more, and she spoke
 words whirling and wild at once: 235

"I see, I see vistas beyond beyond—
 O the abominations!
 How's it, in the struggle for existence,
 woman has the worst of it? 236

In days of yore, I've heard, Jamadagni
 decreed his wife Renuka's
 death, and Parashurama did the deed,—
 for no fault of the lady! 237

And but a while ago I saw the scene
 I now see again: Sita,
 taking a leap into the bouncing fire:
 again, for no fault of hers! 238

And worse to come in the coming ages,
 women as consumer goods,
 ready victims of desire or assault,
 burnings and deprivations! 239

I see and I don't want to see,— I see
 innocence auctioned away,—
 I see children schooled, in malignancy,—
 I see countless betrayals. 240

Devi Sita, this threatening awesome
 imbecility and death
 must not be, this scuttling of happiness;
 Devi Sita, save us all!" 241

With a hug of immeasurable love
 and commanding assurance,
 Maithili put Trijata at her ease
 and took leave of the sisters. 242

Then Sarāma led her back, and Sita
 joined Kama and told him all;
 and after the day's fevered happenings,
 the late night's rest was welcome. 243

When early dawn rose o'er Lanka again,
 Rama sought Vibhishana's
 leave to fly in the car to Ayodhya
 with Sita and Saumitri. 244

- The fourteen-year period of exile
was ending, and Bharata
would be awaiting his elder brother
at the pre-determined time. 245
- The Pushpaka duly arrived dazzling
the eyes of the beholders;
the high seats were of lapis lazuli,
and sweet music from the bells! 246
- It was verily a flying mansion
made up of many chambers;
the floors were inlaid with silver and gold,
and the casements were of pearl. 247
- When the Allies had assembled once more,
Rama praised their services
and asked Sugriva and Vibhishana
to get back to their Kingdoms. 248
- But with one voice the Vanara heroes
and Vibhishana himself
begged to be allowed to go with Rama
and see his coronation. 249
- Gratified by their fraternal feelings,
Rama said: "So be it then;
let's all fly together to Ayodhya -
the air-car is big enough." 250
- Rama first stepped into the Pushpaka,
raised and seated on his lap
the embarrassed Sita, and Lakshmana
then followed and found a chair. 251
- Now Sugriva and his Vanara hosts,
Vibhishana and his friends,
all found comfortable seats in the car
•which soon took off from Lanka. 252
- From their chosen position of vantage,
•Kakutstha and Vaid'hi
commanded a magnificent air-view
and conversed intimately. 253
- "There are things expected of us Princes,"
said Rama, "especially
those of us that claim descent from Raghu:
it could be a taxing role. 254

My heart knew you for a blemishless wife,
 but the mind wove fantasies,
 and I succumbed to the green-eyed monster —
 what a foolish thing to do! 255

Had I rushed and seen you in Asoka,
 I would have met the raw truth;
 but I felt that, like Kishkindha before,
 Lanka was out of bounds too. 256

And besides, though you might call this hindsight,
 the fire-walking has shown all
 that you're indeed ecstatically free
 from any taint of untruth." 257

Sita intervened to say: "All is past,
 and the gods have trimmed our ends;
 let's not reopen the wounds, — the future
 now beckons, let's be ready." 258

By now the air-car was up in the sky
 and was well set on its course,
 and Rama showed the delighted Sita
 the distinguishing landmarks: 259

"See Maithili fair Lanka from the air,
 this city on Trikuta
 the great handiwork of Visvakarma!
 Yes, and there's the battlefield. 260

See, see there below, where Ravana met
 his end, and mark the spots where
 Indrajit was slain by Saumitri, and
 Dhumraksha by Hanuman. 261

Do you see the bridgehead, and the long strip
 across the mighty ocean:
 that was the causeway the Vanaras built,
 and 'twas there that we landed. 262

We now fly over the hallowed spot where
 the great causeway commences:
 'twas there Vibhishana heard me lay down
 the Doctrine of Surrender. 263

It was that long stretch of sea, Maithili,
 one hundred Yojanas long,
 that intrepid Maruti leapt across
 to bring news of me to you." 264

As they neared Kishkindha, Sita desired
to meet Sugriva's spouses,
Tara and Ruma, and take them also
in the car to Ayodhya. • 265

"As you wish," said Rama, and Pushpaka
made an easy landing, and
the two Queens and the spouses of the chief
Vanaras boarded the car. 266

On the move once more, Rama showed Sita
the Rishyamukha mountain:
"Maithili, 'twas there I met Sugriva,
and made my compact with him. 267

Now come to view the Pampa lotus pool
and sainted Sabari's place,
and there beyond is the grim stretch of land
where I destroyed Kabanda. 268

We are now flying over the gaunt trees
of the woods where Jatayu
fought a bitter battle on your behalf
with the vengeful Ravana. 269

Janasthana next, and Panchavati
where we spent such happy days:
and the hermitages of Agastya,
Sutikshna, Sarabhangha. 270

Ah we're over the spot where Viradha,
the colossus, met his end,
and there's Atri's Ashrama, where you met
the blessed Anasuya. 271

We're already over Chitrakuta,
and you'll recall Bharata's
coming, and his receiving my sandals:
and yonder, see Yamuna, 272

and on its banks, Rishi Bharadvaja's
hospitable hermitage
and there's Guha's Sringerapura,
and there, far off, Ayodhya!" 273

As desired, the air-car made smooth landing
near the Rishi's Ashrama,
and paying obeisance to the great sage
Rama asked for news of Home. 274

Bharadvaja answered: "Bharata lives
 an ascetic's life, and rules
 Ayodhya with exemplary ardour,
 and your sandals sustain him. 275

With my gift of vision, I have followed
 the course of your wanderings,
 the destruction of Khara and his corps,
 the abduction of Sita, 276

your pact with Sugriva, Hanuman's leap
 across the sea to Lanka,
 his finding of Sita in Asoka,
 and his reporting to you: 277

Nala's building the bridge across the sea,
 the sanguinary battle,
 the death of Ravana, and the crowning
 of righteous Vibhishana." 278

Before resuming his journey, Rama
 sent Hanuman in advance
 to meet Guha, — then Bharata himself,
 for marking his reactions. 279

Having ruled Ayodhya for fourteen years
 and grown used to sovereignty,
 the news of Rama's return from exile
 might disappoint Bharata. 280

Hanuman was to make a recital
 of the details of Rama's
 wanderings, the many vicissitudes,
 and the final victory. 281

By a close study of his countenance,
 Hanuman would be able
 to read the workings of Bharata's mind,
 and tell Rama beforehand. 282

Maruti embarked on his delicate
 errand at once, and having
 met Guha, hastened to Bharata's place
 in hallowed Nandigrama. 283

The fourteen-year exile tumbling towards
 its close, Bharata was keyed
 with expectancy, and clad in deer-skin
 he sat with his advisers: 284

a princely paragon among hermits,
 a master of self-control,
 a wasted figure yet radiating
 a majestic saintliness! 285

Drawing near with folded hands, Hanuman
 gave all the auspicious news
 about Rama, of the loss of Sita
 and of the recovery; 286

and of Rama's coming with Maithili
 and Saumitri, and allies
 like Sugriva and Vibhishana, and
 now they would soon be there. 287

The news came as a sharp shower of rain,
 and Bharata felt o'ercome
 for the nonce by the sheer excess of joy,
 and hugged Hanuman with tears. 288

"Ah friend!" cried the delighted Bharata,
 "with patience and faith enough,
 one may await the crown of fulfilment
 however long the delay." 289

Then Bharata, happy and excited,
 closely questioned Maruti
 about the unknown intervening years
 since the Chitrakuta meet. 290

An adept in seasoned speech, Hanuman
 gave a dramatic account
 of the serried sequence of happenings—
 the killing of Viradha, 291

the stay at Panchavati, the maiming
 of lustful Surpanakha,
 the destruction of Khara, Dushana,
 and the supporting army: 292

the deceptive golden deer as decoy,
 the seizure of Vaidehi
 by Ravana, the gallant obstruction
 by Jatayu and his death; 293

and so on, of Sita's captivity
 in Asoka, of Rama's
 grief, and his alliance with Sugriva
 for their mutual advantage. 294

Hanuman spoke too of his own sojourn
to Lanka, and his return
with Maithili's crest-jewel to Rama,
and the ensuing campaign. 295

"The victorious Rama is now back,"
the Vanara concluded;
"tomorrow he'll be here with Maithili,
Saumitri, and all the rest." 296

These intimations of coming events,
so instinct with auspicious
anticipations, made Bharata feel
transcendently happy. 297

Promptly he asked Satrugghna to prepare
for Rama's royal welcome,
and forthwith all steps were taken to cool
the pathway to Ayodhya. 298

Banners were hoisted all along the road
from outpost Nandigramma
to the city, and the houses received
an appropriate face-lift. 299

When the night ended and a greater dawn
arose, the constellation
Pushya was on the ascendant, and all
the world seemed to be smiling. 300

Both sides of the beautiful road were lined
with richly clad citizens,
regal elephants, horse-drawn chariots
and colourful infantry. 301

In their resplendent carriages, all three
Queen-Mothers made the journey
to Nandigramma, and there awaited
the return of the exiles. 302

The exodus was indeed so complete
that it looked as though the whole
population, commoners and classes
alike, were collected there! 303

Canto 61: The Coronation of Rama and Sita

Presently all heard the Pushpaka's roar
as it made its arched descent,
and Rama appeared at the car's gateway
with Maithili by his side. 304

There was a lusty deafening huzza
when the vast congregation
caught a glimpse of their beloved Rama
and Sita his flame-like wife. 305

Sun-like in radiance, moon-like in charm,
the royal couple showered
their grace abounding on the expectant
and gratified multitude. 306

And Bharata, transfigured by joy, raised
his joined palms in gratitude,
and stepping into the car, lay prostrate
before Rama and Sita. 307

The melting moment of sweet reunion
sent out vibrations of joy,
and the whole assembly was firmly drawn
into that circle of bliss. 308

When the Vanara and Rakshasa Chiefs
had been duly introduced
and fraternal greetings had been exchanged,
they disembarked from the car. 309

Then Bharata greeted the newcomers —
the colourful warriors
and their wives — in the name and on behalf
of Ayodhya's citizens; 310

and added: "I welcome you, Sugriva,
and you too, Vibhishana,
as brothers, for because of your efforts
this victory has been won." 311

Now Rama and Sita made obeisance
to their mother, Kausalya,
and next to Sumitra and Kaikeyi,
and to Rishi Vasishta. 312

Having made inquiries of all present,
 Rama turned to the pilot
 of Pushpaka, and asked him to return
 to Kubera, its owner. 313

For in times long past, Ravana had waged
 a bitter war against him
 and dispossessed the God of Wealth of both
 Lanka and the Pushpaka. 314

Now the great air-car winged its way above,
 and nosed towards Kubera's
 realm in the remotest north, and slowly
 disappeared behind the clouds. 315

Arriving at Bharata's hermitage
 in sacred Nandigrama,
 the royal Princes and their fair consorts
 were closely drawn together. 316

The fraternal inquiries helped the flow
 of understanding and love,
 and Vanara, Rakshasa and human
 minds mingled admirably. 317

And Bharata, seizing that auspicious
 and uniquely ordained time,
 took Rama's sandals from their pedestal
 and fitted them to his feet. 318

Now raising the joined palms over his head,
 Kaikeyi's beloved son
 respectfully saluted the hero,
 Raghava, and spoke these words: 319

"My mother felt honoured when the Kingdom
 was left in my hands by you:
 even as you gave it, I now gladly
 return the great realm to you. •320

Just as a mere calf can't bear the burden
 that's meant for a mighty bull,
 how can I, with my inadequacy,
 bear the weight of monarchy? 321

Rama! Vanquisher of Foes! a donkey
 can never attain the pace
 of a steed, nor a mere crow a swan's gait;
 neither am I your equal. 322

O Prince! long-armed warrior! should a tree
 well fostered in a courtyard,
 rising high, rich with its spreading branches
 and in full efflorescence, 323

yet decline at the duly ordained time
 to yield the expected fruit,
 how does it profit the house, its inmates?
 Tragic must such failure be. 324

So too the citizens of Ayodhya
 will feel denied and orphaned
 if you do not consent to take the reins
 of governance in your hands. 325

Let the world see you crowned with no delay
 as the King of Ayodhya,
 and you'll shine like the Sun at its zenith
 in all your native glory. 326

And may your sovereignty extend over
 all the world, and continue
 as long as the Sun and the stars revolve,
 and our patient Earth endures " 327

Rama, scourge of his foes, heard Bharata's
 submission, and assented:
 and expert hairdressers who were summoned
 soon sheared Rama's matted locks. 328

Bharata, Satrughna, the Vanara
 King, Sugriva, and the King
 of the Rakshasas, Vibhishana, all
 bathed, attired and decked themselves. 329

Satrughna helped Rama and Lakshmana
 to clothe themselves gorgeously,
 while Sita was prepared for the event
 by all the three Queen-Mothers. 330

Then Kausalya, centered in her son's love,
 enrobed Sugriva's consorts,
 Tara and Ruma, Vibhishana's Queen,
 Sarama, all in due form. 331

When all Raghava's guests were thus ready
 for the move to the city,
 Sumantra — as desired by Satrughna —
 brought the royal chariot. 332

The mighty-armed illustrious Rama
 and the gloried Janaki
 stepped into the chariot, so striking
 in its bearing and beauty; 333

and the others — Sugriva, Hanuman,
 Vibhishana, and the fair
 exotic visiting Queens, all adorned
 with earrings bright and flashing, 334

and dressed in splendid colourful costume,
 accompanied Raghava
 all eager to set eyes on Ayodhya
 the city of the Raghus. 335

The ministers Asoka, Vijaya,
 Siddharta — having resolved
 to request Vasishtha to supervise
 the coronation process, 336

hurried out of their houses to welcome
 Rama at the city gates,
 even as Rama himself was coming
 towards them with Maithili. 337

While Bharata had the reins in his hands,
 Satrughna the canopy,
 Lakshmana held the fan, Vibhishana
 and Sugriva the chowries. 338

Just then resounded from the sky the hymns
 in ardent praise of Rama
 sung entrancingly by celestial choirs
 of Rishis, Maruts and gods. 339

During Rama's progress to the city
 of broad mainstreets and mansions,
 conches and kettle-drums gave out their peals,
 the gratified citizens 340

raised the cry 'Victory to Raghava!',
 received his fulsome blessings,
 and made the train behind his chariot
 a sheerly inspiring sight. 341

Environed by scething humanity,
 Rama was the radiant
 Moon amidst the stars; and ahead of him
 marched many musical choirs. 342

- Virgins carrying consecrated rice
touched with saffron and gold, priests
with holy sweets in their hands, and handsome
cows too, led the procession. 343
- As described by Rama that his gem-set
palace may be allotted
to Sugriva, Bharata escorted
the noble Vanara King. 344
- Now, on Satrughna's request, Sugriva
called his lieutenants and said:
"Take these four golden vessels, and return
with the sacred waters soon." 345
- And with despatch, the stalwart Vanaras
scattered themselves wide and far,
and engaged in the pooling together
of the world's sacred waters. 346
- Jambavan came from the Eastern ocean,
Rishaba from the Southern,
Gavaya from the Western, Hanuman
from the Northern seas: all came, 347
- having laboured throughout the night, before
daybreak, their shining vessels
filled with waters from all the seven seas
and seven hundred rivers. 348
- Pleased with the arrival of the waters
for Rama's Coronation,
Satrughna and the Ministers informed
Vasishta the priest-in-chief. 349
- Having for long looked forward to this hour,
the venerable Rishi
and his peers seated Rama and Sita
on the jewelled golden throne 350
- Then that galaxy of seer-purohita —
Vasishta, Vamadeva,
Katyayana, Vijaya, Kasyapa —
consecrated Raghava 351
- with the mingled waters fragrant and pure
from the rivers and oceans,
even as Mahendra himself was bathed
by the Vasus in heaven. 352

Now all the priests and brahmins in order,
 all the virgins, ministers,
 merchants and warriors, and all the hosts
 and Devas in realms Above, 353

all the Big Four ordainers of the world,
 all, all, anointed Rama
 and Sita with drops of holy water
 mixed with rare flowers and herbs. 354

Then Vasishtha placed on Raghava's head
 the hallowed Crown of dazzling
 splendour that the Kings of the Raghu race
 had traditionally worn. 355

Satrughna held a fair white canopy
 over Rama and Sita,
 while Sugriva and Vibhishana fanned
 the royal pair with chowries. 356

As desired by Indra, Vayu bestowed
 on Rama a pearl necklace
 with a pendent, and a garland of one
 hundred golden lotuses. 357

In celebration, the Gandharvas sang,
 many an Apsaras danced,
 and all the earth seemed to smile with a burst
 of leafage, flowers and fruit. 358

Rising to the occasion, Rama gave
 gold and cows to the twice-born,
 and to Sugriva a begemmed garland
 brilliant like the great Sun's rays. 359

Rama now gave Maithili the necklace
 of purest white with pendent,
 richly adorned with the rarest gems, and
 scintillating like moonbeams. 360

Gallant Angada received two bracelets
 spotted with gems, and likewise
 Hanuman had a pair of spotless robes
 and a few prized ornaments. 361

Maithili then removed from her own neck
 the magnificent necklace,
 and gazed with calm intent at Raghava
 and the gathered Vanaras. 362

- Infallible in thought-reading, Rama
 knew from her face the question
 behind it; and speaking to Janaki,
 he let her judgement decide: 363
- "O well-beloved Beauty! Bestow it
 on the best, the warrior
 who has the virtues of perseverance,
 superhuman energy, 364
- abundant foresight and resourcefulness,
 and proper humility:
 in whom excellence is doubled with might,
 and wisdom with intellect. 365
- O give it to the Hero who has won
 your total approbation!"
 The dark-eyed Sita then gave the necklace
 to the Wind-God's gloried son. 366
- As Hanuman wore that necklace of pearls,
 he acquired a sudden glow
 like a cloud-shrouded mountain radiant
 with a strong stream of moonbeams. 367
- Appropriate mementoes like raiment
 and ornaments were bestowed
 by Rama and Maithili on other
 heroes too, and their consorts; 368
- Dwividha, Mainda, Nila, Jambavan,
 Vibhishana, as also
 Tara, Ruma, Sarama, Anala
 and the dreamer, Trijata. 369
- Then, in his supreme anxiety to give
 good governance to his realm,
 an adept in Dharma himself, Rama
 spoke to righteous Lakshmana: 370
- "As you are well instructed in all things,
 be crowned as Yuva Raja,
 and rule this great land of our forefathers
 as my unfailing ally." 371
- Lakshmana firmly, though respectfully
 declining, Rama installed
 Bharata as the Vicegerent so that
 the realm might thrive in all ways. 372

The festival of the Coronation
 ending, the princely Allies,
their consorts and other prized visitors
 thought of their early return. 373

But this new festival season, after
 the prolonged sterility
of the years of Rama's exile, quickened
 the pulses of Ayodhya, 374

and cast a fascination on the guests,
 for it was verily Life,
a New Life; and glory and gaiety now
 stalked abroad freely once more. 375

Canto 62: Mothers and Sisters

- With the auspicious return of Rama,
Maithili and Saumitri,
Bharata too shed his ascetic weeds
and joined Mandavi his wife. 376
- Hastening to his mansion, Lakshmana
found his saintly Urmila
just awake, as if from a dream profound
that had held her in its clasp. 377
- After the long years of separation,
Bharata and Lakshmana
savoured once more the simple normalcies
of the holy wedded state. 378
- Maithili had a brief private session
with Kausalya and told her
of the vicissitudes of forest life,
the Panchavati idyll — 379
- till the anger of Surpanakha brought
Ravana upon the scene,
and led to the year-long captivity
in Lanka's Asoka Grove. 380
- Although Maithili tried to cast a veil
over her tribulations,
the woman's heart of Kausalya saw all,
and she was speechless with pain. 381
- Sumitra coming in just then, Sita
felt a little more at ease,
even when recalling the rejection
and her plunge into the fire. 382
- "What hell you've been through!" was all Kausalya
could say embracing Sita;
but Sumitra sagely added: "Alas,
sufferance is woman's name! 383
- And yet, Maithili, there's the game of Grace:
while we see things by snatches
and feel confounded, the good is distilled
out of the mire of evil. 384

When you are caught in the frenzy of flux,
 it's like wheels on gravel-heaps,
 a ride over boulders and depressions —
 not still-centeredness in Truth. 385

You've suffered, Sita, as few women have,
 but you'll sustain womanhood —
 fair and frail and injured and insulted —
 for all the ages to come." 386

Kausalya added: "Not Rama's prowess,
 nor his bowmanship either,
 but the fire of your purity and pain
 destroyed the Rakshasa King. 387

I don't know what stark madness drove Rama
 to defame you as he did:
 we're women, and our badge is misery, —
 mother or wife, we suffer." 388

Sumitra interposed with a broad smile:
 "Sister Kausalya, a truce
 to our discontents during this late spring
 and dawn of joy abounding. 389

We don't quite understand, we aren't able
 to pluck the heart of the strange
 rhythm of night and day, pain and pleasure;
 so why not accept, and smile? 390

What seem to us jangling and jarring notes,
 on a comprehensive view
 may merge into the wondrous symphony,
 the theme-song of Becoming. 391

A fair dawn has ushered in this great day,
 Rama and Sita are back,
 and all four brothers breathe Ayodhya's air —
 why, then, wear a heavy look?" 392

Kausalya agreed at once: "Sumitra,
 like *sruti* in a concert
 you refused to be swayed by the ascents
 and descents of emotion; 393

perched on the deeper poise of the Spirit
 you suffer all, yet suffer
 nothing, and by eschewing all passion
 you preserve your sanity. 394

Between Kaikeyi's assertive ego
and your transcendence of 'I',
here I am, the feminine average,
more sinned against than sinning." 395

But Sumitra only said: "Kausalya,
why this self-denigration?
You have always been the best of us all,
the pulse-beat of womanhood!" 396

Leaving the two Queen-Mothers together
to settle the argument,
Sita called on haughty Kaikeyi too
and prostrated before her. 397

After a few seconds' hesitation,
like one shaken into life
Kaikeyi raised Sita to embrace her,
and spoke with pain and trembling: 398

"Maithili, my wounded child, a nightmare
has at last come to an end:
because of my folly, my crime, all have
suffered, and you most of all. 399

Sita, I won't shift the guilt to others,
for mine was the crucial push;
yet I wonder how — or why — it happened,
why I played the villain's role. 400

In my green girlhood at Rajagriha,
we used to amuse ourselves
with sundry dramatic diversissements,
and always I played the fiend! 401

And perhaps what was once a freak or prank
of juvenile innocence
and was held in effective check for long,
erupted unguardedly. 402

It's not fair, Sita, to play the coward
and blame crookback Manthara,
for although she egged me on, mine, mine was
the definitive action. 403

Think of it, Sita, for all time to come
as long as Himavant stands,
the Ganga flows, so long will this saga
live in minds and memories. 404

And Raghava's filial piety, and
 Lakshmana's loyalty, and
 your own role as Sita and Shakti, and
 Kausalya's endurance, and 405

Bharata's great renunciation, all
 will be cherished and admired;
 but equally, generations unborn
 will only recoil from me!" 406

This confessional outburst, so unlike
 her icy self-possession,
 revealed Kaikeyi as vulnerable
 with all her defences gone. 407

Sita felt stirred to the depths, and gauging
 the pain in Kaikeyi's eyes,
 spoke words with a healing touch: "Ah Mother,
 let's not brood over the past. 408

When all seemed bleak in Asoka during
 my sleepless nights, and I was
 perilously close to despair and death,
 the Grace somehow sustained me. 409

And perhaps you don't know that I myself
 by my childish insistence
 and purblind perversity had brought all
 that misery on myself. 410

All life's like a phantasmagoria,
 we feel baffled by the mix
 of the illusory with the real,
 and get easily entrapped. 411

Every ripple of occurrence, every
 move or gesture, has its own
 consanguinity with everything else,
 and is sucked into the sea. 412

But hasty half-believers as we are,
 we miss the filiations,
 take the loop for the Great Chain of Being,
 and wallow in wretchedness. 413

My lease of happiness in Mithila,
 the onrush of wedded bliss
 in Ayodhya, the thirteen-year exile,
 and never a dull moment! 414

I had given up all without a thought,
 all blessings of birth and state,
 all Ayodhya's fabled splendours and joy, —
 but, Mother, mark my folly. 415

For a straying gold-seeming pretty deer
 I lost my balance, I spoke
 shrewishly, shamelessly, and drove away
 my royal protectors both. 416

And, why, why, — I ask myself, — why did I
 noose myself thus with the cord
 of fatality, opening the way
 for Ravana's intrusion? 417

The grim night descended then, for severed
 from Rama and the bruised
 Saumitri, what was it, Mother, but night,
 the year-long night in Lanka? 418

And what happened in that idiot hour
 when, Mother, you lent your ear
 to sly Manthara's counsel which jolted
 your life and jammed its music? 419

There are clearly powers beyond our ken,
 and they have larger concerns,
 and make use of our inbuilt weaknesses
 and petty calculations. 420

And thus were we both condemned, and you ate
 your heart out, Mother, behind
 a sullen façade, and I lived my hell
 in Lanka's Asoka Grove. 421

Sometimes I felt deep within my being
 my sore heart and bleeding soul
 grow so heated up as though they must end
 in a lethal blast and fire. 422

I felt frightened myself, for it might mean
 a flaming raging wildness
 tearing over Lanka, encompassing
 its immitigable doom. 423

Yet something still deeper countermanded
 the impending explosion,
 and 'twas my will that, rather than others,
 I should bear the suffering. 424

But when Hanuman, from his hidden seat
 among the leafy branches
 of the Simsupa in Asoka Grove
 saw me in my sordid plight: 425

tremblingly on the defensive before
 Ravana's lecherous stare
 or cowering before the misshapen
 and menacing wardresses: 426

perhaps by a mystic feat of transfer
 he fissioned my contained fire
 over the sprawling Rakshasas' mansions
 reducing them to debris. 427

Later, when I heard that Hanuman's tail
 had been set on fire, I prayed
 that Agni be cool, and so 'twas indeed
 while all Lanka was ablaze. 428

There was this dual exercise, Mother
 you drove us to Dandaka
 as exiles, and I was then self-propelled
 to my year of penitence! 429

Thus did the noble Bharata, like gold
 emerging the more golden
 from the fire, come out of the ordeal
 the noblest of the brothers. 430

And thus did Sarabhanga, Sabari,
 Viradha and Kabanda,
 attain their several kinds of release
 with the coming of Rama; 431

and Sugriva won his wife and Kingdom,
 and Ravana met his end:
 a series of new times will now begin,
 and it's thanks to you and me! 432

Oft I think, Mother, we don't know a thing,
 our reason and memory,
 our wit and wisdom, seem inadequate,
 and we but writhe helplessly. 433

And yet, at other times of crystalline
 lucidity, I look deep
 and see a crater, and yet deeper still,
 a fount of infinite bliss. 434

Thus when the pain of vain regrets assails
 like a thousand pins of fire,
 what antidote but the faith that the Grace
 is around, the Redeemer! 435

I've confused myself alas, for this joy
 of reunion and return
 makes me giddy almost: I can forget
 the past; so must you, Mother! 436

And besides, in retrospect, our exile
 in the penitential woods
 was an undreamt-of blessing, rather than
 a woeful deprivation. 437

The traps and terrors were few, the native
 felicities were many,
 and the Ashramas were havens of peace,
 and Panchavati was bliss! 438

Let's not therefore think too curiously
 on these equations of cause
 and effect, for I'm sure all are dissolved
 in a deeper harmony." 439

Kaikeyi was profoundly moved, she knew
 the words came from the depths, and
 touched her own heart-strings; and feeling consoled,
 she embraced Sita once more. 440

Gently retrieving herself, Maithili
 now sought her own sisters, and
 found all three together at Urmila's,
 assessing recent events. 441

As always, Urmila had a pensive
 and distant look, Mandavi
 exuded quiet efficiency, and
 Srutakirti was gushing! 442

The apartment was full of coloured paints,
 and taking a sweeping glance
 she marvelled that facets of her exile
 had been recaptured so well. 443

Dreamer, mystic, clairvoyant, Urmila
 had seen with her inner eye
 and touched select scenes from the exiles' life
 with the tints of permanence. 444

Srutakirti jumped from her seat, pointed
 to one of the canvases
 and commented: "See, Sita, this painting
 of your Chitrakuta home; 445

it was finished before I met you there!
 Urmila is just crazy—
 between deep sleep and spasmodic sessions
 with the brush, paint and palette! 446

Urmila has been living in two worlds,
 thus avoiding this flawed earth!
 And see this, and this, and this—compelling
 images of unseen worlds. 447

Some of these, like the demoness rebuffed,
 the vulture in its death-throes,
 the monkey on an incendiary spree;
 these were surreal for us! 448

And Urmila herself, always under
 a psychic pressure when not
 asleep, could hardly name the prototypes
 of her *madhubani* prints." 449

Half guiltily Urmila faced Sita,
 and said with a childlike smile:
 "Indeed, Sister, I can recall nothing,
 all's one, painting and dreaming!" 450

As once at Mithila in their nonage,
 they all sat together now,
 and for a while two or three talked at once,
 and they breathed the joy of life. 451

Srutakirti said: "Do you know, Sita,
 Mandavi has suffered most
 and complained least? Her silence is her strength,
 and renouncing, she enjoys!" 452

Sita felt the throb of pain and pleasure,
 for these were her sisters, and
 they might be the divers emanations
 of the one supreme Shakti! 453

Urmila was manifest Lakshmi, and
 Srutakirti was Kali,
 and Mandavi was Saraswati, and
 she felt drawn towards them all. 454

From the confused and often cross-firing
 talk, Maithili could piece out
 the sort of listless life people had lived
 during the past fourteen years. 455

Nothing was wanting, and yet everything —
 in the absence of Rama,
 Sita, Saumitri — seemed to be wanting,
 like a body without soul! 456

While Bharata ruled from Nandigrama
 in his absent Brother's name,
 'twas Mandavi that reigned in Ayodhya
 with executive finesse. 457

If Urmila with her occult powers
 and audacious intuitions
 unravelled happenings unseen, unheard,
 and gave them form and colour: 458

if Srutakirti with her energy.
 intensity, buoyancy,
 and irresistible drive carried all
 before her, winning smiling: 459

it was Mandavi's role to manifest
 precision and perfection
 of effort and result, and unsleeping
 will to attend to detail. 460

Nothing was too trivial for her care —
 an ailing cow, a lonely
 parrot, a leaking pitcher — and always
 alert, and always busy! 461

Sita could now see that, since Ayodhya
 had become out of bounds for
 even Bharata, a heavy burden
 had been thrown on the others. 462

That explained the key roles of Satrugna
 and his wife, Srutakirti;
 and the behind-the-scenes efficiency
 of the silent Mandavi. 463

Disengaging herself with an effort
 from that intimate circle,
 Sita hurried to the gorgeous mansion
 housing Sugriva's consorts. 464

'Twas with some self-questioning that Sita
 approached Tara and Ruma,
 for though she had met them briefly before
 she knew little about them. 465

Maithili was aware of the background
 of complex relationships
 involving Vali and Sugriva, and
 their wives, Tara and Ruma. 466

Impulsive and impetuous, Vali
 had hounded out Sugriva
 from Kishkindha, and also deprived him
 of his gentle wife, Ruma. 467

When as agreed between them Rama caused
 the overthrow of Vali,
 Sugriva won Ruma and Kishkindha
 and widowed Tara as well. 468

That wasn't a matter of revenge at all
 or the compulsion of lust;
 'twas protection for Tara, as also
 Angada her only sorr. 469

For Sita, the meeting proved most friendly
 and the talk enlightening;
 Ruma was goodness uncomplicated,
 and Tara a noble soul. 470

After a few good-humoured exchanges
 about the Coronation,
 Ruma withdrew as if designedly,
 and all inhibitions ceased. 471

The elder, more weather-beaten, Tara
 broke the ice and said: "Sita,
 how sweet of you to come! It's an oasis
 in the parched desert of love. 472

I'm old, Sita, or at least matronly,
 and therefore experienced;
 and therefore, again, rather worldly-wise:
 but this wisdom is nothing. 473

The immaculate Rama killed Vali,
 and widowed Mandodari;
 and all that toil and terror and travail
 was only to redeem you. 474

And yet, Sita, when the great moment came,
 Rama chose to reject you!
 I couldn't believe when Sugriva told me;
 I feel baffled still, and hurt. 475

Let me tell you what's in my mind, Sita;
 I firmly believe Rama
 has come with a mission, as avatar
 perhaps, a descended god. 476

Yet why, why this assault on sanity?
 this decline to the level
 of the common herd of jealous husbands?
 Ah how you must have suffered!" 477

Sita sighed and took a deep breath and said:
 "I too have asked the question —
 and not once alone — but there's no answer;
 and for other questions too. 478

I don't know why Kaikeyi demanded
 Rama's exile: I saw her
 a little while ago, and she's puzzled
 herself — she simply doesn't know! 479

Why, why Vali's tryst with inviting Death?
 Why Ravana's obsession
 with me? Why a million deaths in Lanka?
 The wailing of the widows! 480

Rama is almost apologetic
 he rejected me because
 he had faith I would emblazon my Truth
 before that vast assembly! 481

This is no answer, he knows it himself;
 Jamadagni asked his son
 to kill Mother Renuka: Gautama
 cursed the hapless Ahalya. 482

You know, Tara, soon after my wedding
 and her own resurrection,
 I chanced to meet the sainted Ahalya,
 and had her benedictions. 483

I'm young, Tara, and you are wise, and like
 Anasuya, Ahalya
 and Mandodari, a shining model
 of pure and chaste womanhood. 484

But how will you define the quintessence
 of womanly chastity?
 Is purity mere insulation from
 the brush of the outside world?" 485

Tara felt o'ercome by Sita's intent
 gaze and trusting anguished heart,
 and found the words at last: "What's this, Sita,
 flawed myself, how should I know?" 486

How can you put me on a pedestal
 with those other holy ones:
 the peerless Anasuya, the flawless
 and regal Mandodari, 487

or even Ahalya, with the great gains
 of her prolonged ascesis?
 I am of a different race and kind,
 with our own compulsive codes. 488

And yet, Sita, since you've posed the question,
 let me tell you what I think,
 a Vanara as I am, now living
 with my late husband's killer. 489

What governs male-female relationships
 is a shifting, elastic,
 evolutionary ethic, changing
 with the changing times and mores. 490

The purity of mind and heart and soul
 is the quintessential mark,
 for the body's self-protection from taints
 fails sometimes, or isn't enough. 491

Because a lecher is unscrupulous
 albeit a king or a god!—
 and seizes or forces a hapless one,
 shall we consign her to hell? 492

Sometimes, Sita, my frenzy conjures up
 a nightmare scenario
 of the exodus of populations,
 of massacres and mass rapes; 493

and after such universal madness,
 should the male of the species,
 having already gored the unfallen,
 still defame the crucified? 494

Without a deep faith in the Fatherhood
 or the Motherhood of God,
 the ties of kinship and community
 weaken and wither away. 495

But when the male ego gorges itself
 on the twin prepossessions
 of war and lechery, these eat themselves,
 and the commonwealth is sick!" 496

Tara paused, as if at a loss what more
 to say, her mind in a siege
 of conflicting emotions, and wishing
 she could unsay her saying. 497

But the anguish had gone home, and Sita
 tried desperately to come
 to terms with the divers incendiary
 possibilities of life 498

At last she found her voice: "But why, Tara,
 when God is the home of all,
 the source of all, we his derivatives
 have thus messed up everything?" 499

Tara answered: "That's what I ask myself:
 how could the Delegations
 of Light, Love, Bliss, Life lose their divine links
 and become night, hate, pain, death? 500

There's surely a total Truth whose quartet
 of earth-manifestations
 have somehow turned into their opposites
 and waxed into a Falsehood. 501

The powder-puff of 'honour', the vengeful
 'An Eye for an Eye' war cry,
 the ego's thrust, can but unleash Death, while
 charity goes underground! 502

And yet Sita, I've not ceased to hanker
 or hope, and I still believe,
 for all the riddles he poses, Rama
 is our Saviour-Spirit. 503

One word more, Sita, O blameless stainless
 Earth-born and brave Madonna
 of Suffering! the greater role is yours
 as Rama's conscience and soul." 504

The conversation had thus suddenly
 come to a stop, and Tara,
 befitting her age and wisdom, offered
 her good wishes to Sita. 505

Maithili too was deeply touched, and felt
 a descent of peace within,
 and having made obeisance, she took leave
 and moved to Sarama's place. 506

For Sita, the round of visits after
 the colourful fulfilment
 of the Coronation ceremony
 was a healing pilgrimage. 507

She found Sarama relaxing, and while
 Anala seemed excited
 with her discovery of Ayodhya,
 Trijata was moody still. 508

The coming of Sita was a bonus
 and a grace, and Sarama
 received her with an explosion of joy,
 and a shower of blessings. 509

Sarama could see a cloud hovering
 over the pensive Sita,
 for fits of harrowing introspection
 had veiled her face with sadness. 510

"But Sita," said Sarama anxiously,
 "the tedious long night's vigil
 in Asoka Grove is ended at last;
 why, then, this melancholy?" 511

"It's all right, Mother," Maithili answered;
 "I've been calling upon friends,
 and perhaps I've emotionally stretched
 myself too much and too long. 512

But how can I ever thank you enough
 for your unfailing goodness,
 for all the moral and occult support
 you all gave me in Lanka!" 513

“No, no,” Sarama answered with a smile,
 “you came as golden Grace-Light,
 and your imprisonment was the charter
 of Lanka’s liberation.

514

‘Twas rather more difficult for my Lord,
 for he had to flee Lanka
 and later raise his hand against the bone
 of his bone, and flesh as well.

515

He must have undergone a regular
 insurrection deep within,
 for don’t you know what this means: he’ll go down
 branded as a defector!

516

How many in this world of masks and mists
 can see the fateful issue
 between the forces of Light and Darkness,
 and ally with the Divine?

517

But no more of this, Sita, for Lanka
 has learnt her lesson the hard
 way, and the wounds will heal in course of time,
 and new times prolong themselves.”

518

The smog receded, and Maithili talked
 with spontaneous abandon
 and conviviality with Anala,
 and all constraints disappeared.

519

Sita was about to rise and take leave
 of them when she found herself
 caught for a second in Trijata’s gaze
 so intent and hypnotic.

520

As one participating in a trance,
 Maithili heard the strange words:
 “Let me not admit fresh impediments
 to your new felicity.

521

I see a cloud no bigger than my hand
 perch on the far horizon:
 perhaps it will pass, but my mind misgives —
 may the Mother be with you!”

522

Then Trijata relaxed, and smiled a wan
 and lingering smile, and said:
 “These fits aren’t uncommon with me, Sita,
 and probably mean nothing.”

523

Now Maithili rose and bade them goodbye,
 but Anala followed her
 till she was back in her royal mansion,
 joining her expectant Lord. 524

The night seemed endearingly to blanket
 the magnificent city,
 and happiness once more permeated
 the citizens' consciousness. 525

Yet one more visit remained, and Sita
 hurried to Vasishta's Grove
 and paid obeisance to Arundhati,
 the all-suffering Shakti. 526

Gathering the prostrate Queen in her arms,
 the Rishipatni, tuning
 her omniscient gaze and understanding,
 spoke these nectarean words: 527

"I now see you crowned with a golden glow,
 and you're clearly the channel
 of a manifestation meant to give
 a push towards Tomorrow. 528

Who but you, my dear, sustained by a will
 from Above, although faced by
 those daunting nightmarish tribulations,
 could have thus scatheless come through? 529

Even in the future now unfolding,
 'twill not be day all the time,
 life's a web of varied yarn, but fear not,
 the Grace is with you always!" 530

The truth-speaking and compassionate Scer
 could speak neither less nor more,
 and Sita, contented yet alerted,
 made a parting obeisance. 531

As Sita returned in her palanquin
 to her high-gated mansion,
 the benevolent night lay sprawled across,
 and she sought the folds of sleep. 532

Canto 64: **Rama Rajya**

Another and a greater dawn shone forth
o'er imperial Ayodhya,
and the great Sun-God held forth the promise
of a wondrous Golden Age. 533

As the Coronation festivities
had ended, Vibhishana,
Sugriva, Hanuman and Jambavan,
along with their retinue, 534

having received largesse in fair measure
from magnanimous Rama,
the prized happy visitors now prepared
to make return to their homes. 535

The Vanara Chiefs offered obeisance
to Rama and Maithili,
received the Grace of their benedictions
and flew back to Kishkindha. 536

Royal Vibhishana, soul of Dharma
and Lord of Lanka, also
returned with his consort and retinue
to his distant dominion. 537

And the noble illustrious Raghava
and flame-pure Sita, his Queen,
peacefully governed their far-flung Empire
and gave joy to the people. 538

All the varied castes, classes and sections,
refraining from selfishness,
thrived on their own toil, and won and enjoyed
all legitimate blessings. 539

The quality of integral welfare
marked Ayodhya's governance
sustained by Rama's firm understanding
and Sita's solicitude. 540

And there were the promising beginnings
of an era of delight:
wasn't it the hour of the ascendant gods
and dawn of the Life Divine? 541

This dawn-ho . splendour of the righteous reign
 of Kausalya's darling son,
 with the Earth-born, Sita, sharing his throne,
 her Grace matching his Power: 542

the clotced fog and darkness of the past
 four and ten years of exile,
 when Ayodhya's native Light was banished
 to the forests of the Night: 543

when the blameless Bharata from his cell
 in outpost Nandigram
 ruled, with Rama's consecrated sandals
 holding the reins of control: 544

when all things were ordained by the mystic
 Presence of the absent Prince
 and the meticulous efficiency
 of the loyal Vicegerent: 545

that uncertain stretch of time of grapple
 between the Asuric hordes
 and the protagonists of Light had ceased
 with this burst of new Sunrise. 546

But a year ago all had seemed awry
 in the three contrasted realms
 of Ayodhya, Vanara Kishkindha
 and the Rakshasas' Lanka. 547

Endowed by Nature and the humane arts,
 Ayodhya on Sarayu
 went about her numerous tasks of peace
 though dimmed by the touch of tears. 548

At Kishkindha the mighty Vali ruled
 while the hapless Sugriva,
 his dispossessed brother, lay in hiding
 on the Rishyamukha Mount. 549

And Sita, torn by deceit from Rama's
 side by the Rakshasa King,
 lay languishing in the Asoka Grove
 in far-off sea-girt Lanka. 550

The citizens of Ayodhya followed
 their normal occupations
 as in a strange trance of automation,
 with the soul inert, asleep. 551

Prince Bharata felt like one self-exiled
 from Ayodhya's civic life,
 and with matted locks and austere raiment
 shaped his life in askesis. • 552

While the absent Sita, the Earth-born Flame,
 still lighted the world within,
 the silent and sensible Mandavi
 sustained the pulses of time. 553

Ghost-like Kaikeyi paced the corridors
 of her polished apartments,
 and the cautious crookback kept her distance
 albeit trailing her mistress. 554

Urmila, swaying between spells of sleep
 or trance and intense sessions
 of painting or mystic recordations,
 united the sundered halves. 555

Srutakirti was of course everywhere,
 and was always everything
 to everybody, consoler, gossip,
 counsellor, executrix! 556

Kausalya counted the years, months, weeks, days –
 thirteen years after, one year
 remained, ah just a little more patience,
 and hope, and faith most of all! 557

Only Sumitra, in her all-knowledge
 that imposed total silence,
 moved unobtrusively; she was the Bass,
 the soul of the Symphony. 558

Vali in his rugged upland-city
 of Kishkindha ruled and reigned
 undisturbed by thought of guilt or pity
 •or possible consequence, 559

while Sugriva, in his Rishyamukha
 hide-out, nursed his huge grievance
 and was sore over his lost Ruma, now
 in possessive Vali's arms. 560

And, amidst the oppressive silences
 of Lanka's Asoka Grove,
 torn apart from her royal Lord, Sita
 eked out her nightmare non-life. 561

Then a procession of a year of months
 and the whole prospect had changed:
 the wise Hanuman having brought Rama
 and Sugriva together, 562

and so Vali's life becoming forfeit,
 Sugriva came to his own;
 and Rama could end Ravana's misrule
 and rescue lost Maithili. 563

The air-dash to Ayodhya had followed,
 then the grand Coronation:
 thus were the foundations laid for a new
 and worthy dispensation. 564

The heroic and human stood revealed
 in Kosala's spacious realm
 as the Life Divine in efflorescence
 warmed up by the Mind of Light. 565

The rule of the subhuman and unjust
 Vali of warrior stance
 gave place to the humanised governance
 of Vanara Sugriva. 566

And in Lanka, the mighty Ravana,
 Lord of Unrighteousness, had
 fallen, giving place to Vibhishana,
 the upholder of Dharma. 567

A new world of diversified richness
 and deeper affinities,
 the Nara-Vanara-Rakshasa league
 tasted the blessings of peace. 568

The crash of an existing harmony
 by the sudden intrusion
 of a false note—the snapping of a string—
 asks for a new ordering. 569

A little turn or twist or toss or trick
 does the mangling of the tune,
 and demands a supreme effort to bring
 rejuvenation about. 570

The crookback Manthara's spiteful impulse,
 the fall of Vali, the crash
 of the Rakshasa's prestige and power,
 all were subtly interlinked. 571

Where was the beginning of the fateful
 sequence of cause and effect,
 the muffled but ruthless chain-reaction —
 and did they yet see the end? 572

Didn't one's hindsight locate the soul of good
 in things seemingly evil?
 or the sinister taint of corruption
 on the glittering façade? 573

Go back and back to the Progenitor,
 and lay at his ample door
 the authorship of all the contingent
 transactions of life on earth! 574

He willed he would at once be manifold
 yet integrally the same:
 the entire puzzle and the labyrinth,
 and the saving clue as well! 575

Out of the sole cosmic Egg, a billion
 had sprung into existence—
 species with their teasing variations,
 and life with its mutations. 576

At the dizzy height of the creative
 ecstasy of joy and pain,
 first the godly race, then the Asuric,
 and finally the human. 577

The divine beings, endowed with excess
 of one or another trait,
 a push untrammelled hither or thither,
 suffered from sheer satiety. 578

Agni was raging fire, and Varuna
 downpour and flood, and Vayu
 all whirlwind, Yama ever anti-life,
 •and Indra self-indulgence. 579

'Twas Prajapati taught them the virtue
 of restraint, moderation
 and humility, lest they overstretch
 themselves and wallow in grief. 580

The Asuras, affluent in their might
 and prone to self-assertion
 and cruelty, made terror their gospel
 and defied the verities. 581

All Light repelled them, and they had a taste
 for acts of desecration,
 cried 'O Night, be thou our Day!' and roistered
 their way to self-destruction. 582

Prajapati their Sire gave sage advice:
 "Cruelty, like all excess,
 hurts itself, and not the victim alone—
 show pity, hold back in time!" 583

The fairest, frailest, of the three species—
 the humans—in their insane
 drive for security grew wings of greed
 and brooded o'er their pickings. 584

Nothing ever satisfied them—things and
 things, and more and more of them
 in excess, and a sick rapacity
 for prestigious surplusage! 585

And Prajapati told them: "Possessions
 but crib, cabin and deaden
 your native sovereignties: give away, then,
 and travel light, and survive!" 586

Thus when the initial emanations—
 gods, demons, men—were blighted
 by the rank insidious aberrations
 of *kama*, *krodha*, *lobha*, 587

the shared progenitor, Prajapati,
 thundered the same DA at them,
 and they grasped its meaning as *Damyata*,
 or *Dayadhvam*, or *Datta*! 588

The species had then multiplied themselves
 with numberless mutations,
 and varieties of form, selfhood and breed,
 and essayed co-existence. 589

But the spiralling Time Spirit threw up
 aberrant aggrandisements
 and intolerable iniquities
 and saṅgas of suffering. 590

It was during one such monstrous tumble
 of an established order
 that Sita's tears had engineered a new
 concord among the nations. 591

And Rama Rajya, in its intrinsic
functioning, now extended
the world over, comprising Rākshasa,
Vānara and Mānava 592

Thus from Ayodhya's synoptic centre
of Power in league with Grace,
now radiated the life-giving rays
of blemishless well-being 593

When presently the Venerable Ones,
the Rishis, wise Agastya
leading them, came on a visit and sought
audience of Raghava, 594

he received with proper ceremony
and reverential regard
the self-illuminated hoary visitors
from the penitential woods 595

The famed sages centred in *tapasya*
pronounced their benedictions
and expressed their deep joy at the return
of righteous rule everywhere 596

It was no mean feat to have faced and slain
such formidable fighters
as Ravana, Indrajit, Prahasta,
Mahodara, Nikumbha 597

In a voice that echoed through all the worlds
the Rishi congregation
blessed Rama and his brothers, Sita and
her sisters, and one and all 598

Some minutes of sheer nectarean silence
signified a fulfilment
profound and serene, but after a pause
•Rama gave voice to his thoughts• 599

“Revered Elders and all-knowing Sages,
blessed are we in Ayodhya
that your visit today has sanctified
this Kingdom and graced us all 600

But as I review the years of exile,
the painful antecedents,
the vicissitudes of life in the woods,
and the deceit and terror 601

of Ravana's abduction of Sita
 and her cruel internment
 in the Asoka Grove, and the dolour,
 and the sanguinary strife, 602

I cannot but be seized with puzzlement:
 why, why? why the Rakshasas?
 Wherefore did they emanate from the womb
 of the cosmic mystery? 603

You from whose steady gaze nothing is hid,
 can you not enlighten me—
 for I see bits and patches of the truth,
 but not the integral Whole; 604

can you not, uncanny seers of times past,
 present and future! show me
 the truth behind the tread of the events,
 the clue to the mystery?" 605

Canto 65: Agastya Speaking

There followed a pause almost unending;
and then, as though that was why
he had come, the omniscient Agastya
addressed these words to Rama : 606

“O warrior King, there are mists behind
mists, and the lost horizon
forever lures us on, and forever
eludes our attaining it. 607

A fraction of a fraction at a time,
an atom of an atom,
that’s what even the most percipient,
the wisest, can hope to see, 608

and when we stray beyond our familiar
rounds, we lose all direction,
we jumble the real and unreal,
we miss the imperatives. 609

The bizarre can blind the bewildered eye,
crass actuality can
deaden one’s outraged sensibility
and confound the verities. 610

Who knows the beginning of beginnings
when we’ve all come but mid-way,
and the conclusion is unconcluded --
where’s the final picture, then? 611

At some time in the pastness of the past
Pulastya in askesis
had from Rishi Trnabindhu’s daughter
a son and heir, Visravas. 612

Growing up in *tapas* like his father,
worthy Visravas wedded
Devavarni, and had a gifted son,
Kubera, beloved of all. 613

His own sustained tapasya won for him
all the sovereignty of wealth,
and he ranked fourth among the gods after
Indra, Varuna, Yama. 614

He made luxurious Lanka — once the seat
 of the Rakshasa Empire —
 his home, and had for his use an air-car,
 the well-furnished Pushpaka.” 615

When Rama gently intervened to ask
 how the Rakshasas had held
 imperial sway for long from Lanka, and
 wherefore they had gone away, 616

Agastya once again took up the thread
 of the narrative and traced
 the Rakshasa race to far distant times,
 lost in dim antiquity: 617

“I’ll start with Heti, who wedded Bhaya,
 Yama’s sister, and their son,
 Vidyutkesa, married Sandhya’s daughter,
 fair Sālakatankata. 618

She bore a son, Sukesha, and left him
 lone on the Mandara mount
 and rushed back to her husband to renew
 their amorous excesses. 619

But as a foundling favoured by Uma,
 Sukesha prospered, and had
 from Devavati three sons, Sumali,
 Malayavan and Mali. 620

They were practitioners of askesis
 and won rare boons from Brahma,
 and used them to harass and persecute
 the gods and demons alike. 621

And they moved to magnificent Lanka
 the Southern city structured
 by Visvakarma so as to rival
 Indra’s Amaravati. 622

Then the three brothers married three sisters:
 Malayavan, Sundari;
 Sumali, Ketumati; and Mali,
 the excellent Vasudha. 623

Rich was the issue of the marriages,
 but in their pride of success
 and the blindness of their o’erweening pride,
 they outraged the decencies. 624

The victimised gods made a desperate
 appeal to Narayana,
 and in the terrific fight that ensued
 the Rakshasas were routed. 625

Mali lay dead, hard-pressed Malayavan
 retired to the underworld,
 and Sumali brooded out slimy thoughts
 of revenge and revival. 626

Ambitious, and scheming to supersede
 Kubera, Sumali asked
 his daughter, Kaikasi, to beget sons
 from great Visravas himself. 627

Now when obedient Kaikasi appeared
 in all her seductive charm
 before Visravas during the fire-rite,
 his eyes ardent and ablaze, 628

he looked into the heart of her mission,
 knew the evil it would breed
 (for her chosen hour was malevolent),
 yet gave her what she desired. 629

'You may feel fulfilled, Kaikasi,' he said,
 'but 'twas a wrong time you chose
 for this consummation, and you'll mother
 vicious and cruel children.' 630

On her earnest remonstrance he added:
 'The last will redeem the rest';
 and thus came Ravana, Kumbhakarna,
 Surpanakha their sister, 631

and righteous Vibhishana, last of all;
 and they grew up in the woods,
 each in consonance with the native traits
 decreed by fatality. 632

Retiring to Gokarna, the brothers
 engaged in austerities
 spread over a long period of time
 and won Brahma's high regard. 633

Ravana desired immunity from
 death at the hands of divers
 classes of creatures; Kumbhakarna's tongue
 made a slip, and asked for sleep, 634

while Vibhishana, centered in the Self
 although a Rakshasa born,
 prayed only that he should never swerve from
 the straight path of righteousness. 635

Now Sumali, still nursing his fevered
 thoughts of revenge and return,
 urged Ravana to seize from Kubera
 the royal throne of Lanka. 636

Hesitant at first, Ravana o'ercame
 his scruples, and their father
 Visravas himself advised Kubera
 not to resist his brother. 637

'The creature is cruel,' said the great sage,
 'and will sin against Dharma:
 leave Lanka to the wicked Rakshasas,
 and retire to Kailasa.' 638

And so Lanka came under Rakshasa
 rule again, and Ravana
 married the virtuous Mandodari,
 who bore a son, Meghanād. 639

Not content with the Kingdom of Lanka,
 Ravana's eyes roamed elsewhere;
 he desecrated the hermitages
 and slew the sainted inmates. 640

Driven by a mad insatiable lust,
 Ravana trampled upon
 the decencies and threw his weight about
 like an elephant in rut. 641

When Kubera advised moderation,
 Ravana in furious
 battle defeated the proud Lord of Wealth
 and seized his prized Pushpaka. 642

There was no limit now to Ravana's
 reckless rampageous career
 of conquest and deprivation, till he
 overreached himself at last. 643

Trying in a wild gesture of contempt
 to uproot Shiva's mountain,
 Ravana found his hands crushed, and he howled
 with pain and disgrace for years. 644

The reverberations of his wailing
 echoed through the triple worlds;
 then his release came – yet he persisted
 in evil unlimited 645

till his insane lust for Vedavati,
 that pure flame, put out the light;
 but rekindled in Sita's anguished heart,
 the fire destroyed him indeed " 646

Agastya went on with his narrative –
 was there verily no end
 to the harrowing tale of Ravana's
 follies and enormities? 647

Was he single – or motley – or legion –
 did he diet all the time
 on sheer excrescence and extravagance,
 on lust, violence and greed? 648

Once blinded by the fumes of war, he had
 in the heat of the moment
 killed his sister Surpanakha's husband,
 the titan Vidyujihva 649

She had then raised a hue and cry on his
 return to Lanka, so he
 sent her with half-brother, Khara, to share
 the Dandaka vastnesses. 650

Sita couldn't help linking her misfortunes
 with all these bizzareries
 in the confused web of relationships
 involving men, gods, demons 651

While Agastya was thus telling the tale
 of Rakshasa origins
 and of the sanguinary history
 of Ravana's campaigns, 652

Sita, listening with grim intensity,
 looked sad and wistful, her eyes
 grew moist, and in her memory's chambers
 she felt a strange stir of life. 653

Ah Vedavati! the resonant name
 threw wide open the trap-doors
 of a million-year store of memories
 and galvanised the dead past. 654

It all returned with lightning suddenness:
 the Himalayan retreat,
 and the young ardent maid in matted hair
 and clad in deer-skin raiment! 655

Her sire, a Brahma Rishi, used to chant
 evocative Vedic Riks,
 and she had been moulded by that music
 even in her mother's womb. 656

Fifteen years she had grown in sun and snow,
 and as became her rare name,
 she had embodied the ardour serene
 for the consecrated God. 657

Then too, was it Ravana that had turned
 on her his lecherous eye
 and driven her to light a blazing fire
 for her self-immolation? 658

Agastya was continuing his tale
 of Ravana's multiple
 misdemeanours, his unquenchable lusts
 and his vile desecrations: 659

the prosperous kingdoms he overran,
 the warriors he laid low,
 the royal dames and the hapless maidens
 he snatched, and then sneaked away. 660

Agastya's monotonous recital
 lacerated none the less,
 and the tears and cries of the injured ones
 materialised again. 661

Was it herself, wondered Sita, since all
 seemed so vivid and painful;
 was it indeed Vadavati that had
 now come back as the Earth-born? 662

The Rishi's level voice prolonged itself
 and evoked the old dramas
 of passion and hatred and violence,
 and Sita listened again: 663

"With Ravana came rampage and ruin,
 and no quarter escaped him;
 not Ayodhya itself was spared the blow,
 and King Anaranya fell. 664

Then, on wily Narada's suggestion
the Rakshasa turned away
from the world of human mortality,
and challenged Yama himself! 665

Ah if he could effect the death of Death,
the extinction of Yama,
that would redound to his lasting credit;
he might out-top the topmost! 666

Thus did the Lord of Unrighteousness try
to set at naught the engines
of the moral world of good and evil,
the Law of Causality. 667

Even so, Yama's irresistible
death-missile would have undone
Ravana, but Brahma interceded,
and Yama withdrew his shaft. 668

The ruthless Ravana thus rode rough-shod
o'er all the sanctities, and
age-long proprieties and humanities,
and raged like a pestilence. 669

He seized the women he fancied whether
married or single, clapped them
in his Pushpaka, having ruthlessly
routed their male protectors. 670

Trapped in the air-car, the wretched women
wailed piteously, and their sighs
and tears were like the fire and the fountain,
and the air-car a fire-pit!" 671

A recrudescence of agony shook her
once more, as if Sita lived
the outraged women's shame and suffering
in her own submerged being. 672

And even Ravana wasn't the very
first or worst of such sinners:
hadn't Indra, with his cowardly trick on
fair Ahalya's chastity, 673

injured his own non-pareil spouse, Sachi,
by his infidelity,
and outraged all innocent womanhood,
more sinned against than guilty? 674

In Agastya's cold recital, Brahma
 himself had reprimanded
 Indra for his despicable action
 in befooling Ahalya. 675

Brahma had fashioned her without flaw, but
 when Indra took her by fraud
 and force, 'twas he set the vile tradition
 of such cunning and deceit. 676

"Alas, alas!" Maithili cried within,
 and her soul writhed, as if hurt;
 "must the lecherous male of the species,
 be it god, demon or man, 677

must the wolf-male, the crass sensualist,
 have it ever his own way?
 Must the fishmonger-male forget himself
 and desecrate womanhood? 678

This imbecile Ravana, fulfilling
 his father's petulant curse,
 caught women and crushed them, as wanton boys
 tortured birds and butterflies. 679

Maithili faced the excruciating fact
 that the best of humankind, —
 they too, like Dasaratha, had succumbed
 to polygamous desires. 680

Aye, aye, she mused bitterly, for these men,
 these same knight-errants of lust,
 women were but commodities, trophies
 or pieces of property! 681

Woman was cheap — the Mother of the race
 was nothing, worse than nothing;
 sisters, daughters, — weren't they expendable?
 Sufferance was Woman's name! 682

Yet once more Sita reined her racing thoughts,
 and grew attentive again;
 and she heard Agastya speak with anguish
 about the rape of Rambha: 683

"More and more, and still more, of this frenzy,"
 mused Sita in agony;
 "so Ravana, claiming she was fair game,
 had forced Rambha to his lust!" 684

Preserving a disarming outer calm,
Maithili yet fumed within,
saw Rambha too as her earlier self,
and her insurance as well 685

For, after that abuse, her own lover,
Nalakubara, had cursed
that one such attempt more, and Ravana's
head would split into fragments 686

This was to come as a Magna Charta
for the unwilling women
in Ravana's household, and arrest him
from the ultimate outrage 687

Canto 66: Sita's Stream of Consciousness

Wonders were many indeed, thought Sita,
yet the run of Ravana's
exploits as killer — and as ravisher
of women — was past belief. 688

But she marvelled at the immense time-span
backgrounded in Agastya's
recapitulation of Ravana's
misdeeds and atrocities. 689

Was it the same Ravana rough-riding
through many generations
of mankind, boldly flaunting his ticket
of defiant deathlessness? 690

Was Ravana one or many? Was he
a primordial pestilence,
a symbol of the evil of the world,
a self-sustaining Darkness? 691

Perhaps a name, disease, epidemic,
as much a part of earth-life
as the rotation of the six seasons,
or the day's cycle of hours! 692

But this only made it worse, for who could
ever hope to give battle
to such a time-transcending abstraction,
a cosmic malignity? 693

Sita's simple human mind felt jolted
by the multiplicity
of Ravana's cavalcade of victims
of his megalomania. 694

And except that Sita had herself met
the repulsive Titan's stare,
suffered his animal touch more scalding
than cataclysmal hell-fire, 695

Sita would have dismissed the Rakshasa
as a Rishi's invention,
a persisting superstition, a toy
for the adult nursery. 696

Sita's dilemma was she knew enough
of the Ravana terror
to abhor it, yet felt incredulous
about its immensitudes. 697

Everything — the mind-fatiguing time-scale,
the bouts of *tapas*, the boons
and curses — conspired to throw out of gear
her mechanism of thought. 698

She wouldn't blaspheme or be irreverent,
of course, yet couldn't appreciate
Brahma's unthinking showering of boons
on monsters like Ravana ' 699

What *tapas* was it that forced from Brahma
so permissive a charter
licensing Ravana and Meghanad
to terrorise humankind? 700

Among the silences in Asoka
and later in Ayodhya
she had held inquisitions in her mind
coalescing the ends and means. 701

Try hard as she might, she felt unable
to unravel the criss-cross
complexity of Karma and free will,
askesis and recompense. 702

Finding herself lost in the nightmare-net
of the doings of the gods,
demons and humans, she felt at a loss
to locate the norms of life. 703

As she went on registering the turns
of the Ravana story
with its compounding of the heroic,
farcical and sinister, 704

in the plateau of her own consciousness
Maithili re-enacted
selected scenes in their perversity
or sheer comicality. 705

It now occurred to her, as oft it had
under the Simsupa tree,
that Ravana was a fool even more
than a lecherous monster. 706

And now she was vastly amused to learn
 of Ravana's being caught
 in those ridiculous predicaments
 of pathetic helplessness. 707

The great Surya could dismiss Ravana
 with withering contempt, and
 Shiva with a dip of his toe could make
 the Titan wail for ages. 708

Both Vali the Vanara and the man,
 Kārta-vīrya Arjuna,
 reduced to paltry insignificance
 the rumbustious Ravana. 709

When the Rakshasa cast his leering eyes
 on Mahalakshmi herself,
 the mere laugh of the Lord sent Ravana
 hurtling down to hit the earth. 710

And the hefty girls of Sveta-dvipa
 could toss Ravana about,
 now quite deflated into an insect
 with ten mouths and twenty hands! 711

In retrospect, Sita thought, it was good
 the colossus, Ravana,
 was cut to size in Agastya's telling—
 and the verities stood firm! 712

Now her wandering mind felt arrested
 and hauled back when Agastya
 began telling the extraordinary
 history of Hanuman. 713

Ravana and Hanuman, paragons
 of power both, and clashing
 opposites: yet between them, thought Sita,
 such an abysmal divide! 714

With the Rakshasa, power was divorced
 from the grace of self-restraint,
 power fed on power and greed and lust,
 power galloped towards Death 715

With Hanuman, power was to become
 anonymous, unconscious,
 accomplish self-transcendence as service,
 and be in shackles to Grace. 716

- It was balm to Maithili's listening soul
to hearken to Agastya's
lucid narrative of Anjaneya's,
heroic and gloried life. 717
- Impetuous and valorous, learned
and wise; a seasoned speaker;
tactful, responsible and statesmanlike;
serviteur of the Divine! 718
- In foul and fair weather alike, he had
served Sugriva, his master;
and found in Rama and Sita the twin
Vedas of his religion. 719
- When Agastya came to the end of his
recital, Rama's queries
had been answered in full, and the moral
had been blazoned forth as well. 720
- Now Rama and Sita rose and offered
obeisance to Agastya
and the Rishis, and received their blessings,
ere they took leave and withdrew. 721
- The Court dispensed for the day, and on her
return to her apartment,
in a daze of deep abstraction, Sita
communed with her inner Self. 722
- Out of the turbid sea of consciousness
images of Light arose,
and as she fixed her gaze on them, they glowed
like apocalyptic signs 723
- While the annals of the Rakshasa race
and the Paulastya saga
had captivated the assembly's ear
as Agastya recalled them, 724
- the deeper ethical imperatives
seemed to raise their warning heads
above the monotony of the tales
of passion, greed and folly. 725
- Settled now amid the serenities
of her austere apartment,
Sita reviewed the scenic-sequences
of sound and shame and fury, 726

as also the counterpointed saga
 of Hanuman's birth and growth,
 from mindless violence and wasteful speed
 to selfless consecration. 727

"Ah this picture . . . and this!" she told herself;
 "images of giant strength!"
 Yet oh the difference, — still the two played
 their roles on the same world stage! 728

This Ravana seized numberless women
 regardless of place, season
 and circumstance, and his limitless lust
 asked for constant fuelling. 729

Which husband that was sane would look beyond
 a paragon of beauty,
 sweetness and duty like the unsurpassed
 exemplar, Mandodari? 730

And, perhaps, for such a perversity
 like Ravana, lechery
 knew neither fulfilment nor satiety
 but fed always on itself. 731

'Twas his flawed and vicious mole of Nature
 that compulsively drove him
 to grasp vilely at the prohibited,
 and foul and desecrate it. 732

Alas, the pursuer was himself chased
 by the furies of self-forged
 Necessity, and the lecherous pulls
 ordained their own extinction. 733

Beside Ravana that wasted power
 and puerile magnificence,
 Hanuman shone as the lone Eminence
 of fiery Brahmacharya. 734

After the initial phase of spendthrift
 extravagance of abuse
 of power, his desire-self was content
 to be consumed in Service. 735

For all his terrible austerities
 Ravana failed to secure
 from the all-wise Uncreate the supreme
 boon of immortality. 736

But Hanuman, although he neither asked
nor hoped for any, became
the recipient of many a choice boon,
including incorruption. 737

And Sita couldn't help reminding herself
that Rama's wedded life lay
poised between the dual extremities---
indulgence and refusal. 738

Sita went into a deep trance of thought
when past and present mingled,
and all Time was a seamless wonder-web
of integral Becoming. 739

If Ravana and the miserable
months under the Simsupa,
as seen from the vantage of the present,
could be dismissed as a dream, 740

Rama's victory over Ravana,
for all its finality,
seemed less than clinching in the hazy stretch
of the uncharted future. 741

In a world of phenomena governed
by Nature's imperatives
there were these sundry manipulators
with designs to queer the pitch: 742

the scheming ambitious technologists
of askesis who wrung from
selfcreate Brahma immoderate boons
to pervert the course of things! 743

Perhaps, for all his generosity,
Brahma, wiser than he seemed,
gave boons that only boosted the ego
while breaking the base at last. 744

But Sita's heart of Earth-born innocence
rebelled against a system
that permitted random interference
by so-called boons and curses. 745

And recalling some of the characters,
the more bizarre elements
of the Ravana Rajya, Maithili
found her moral sense rebel. 746

She was intrigued that the sage, Visravas,
 could respond to Kaikasi's
 advances, knowing that the progeny
 would be undesirable. 747

Wasn't he too culpable in fair measure
 for the unfolding saga
 of the foul Rakshasa's reign of terror,
 and her own tribulations? 748

But this will never do, said Maithili
 to herself, and arrested
 her out-distancing thoughts, and called them back
 to the kennel of her mind. 749

She knew that such mental inquisitions,
 such insistent questionings,
 the search for reasons, justifications,
 logical formulations, 750

aye, the scething boil of cerebration,
 the thunder-screams of why, why,
 the trick of dialectical roundings,
 all were pointless and puerile. 751

But the mind couldn't be easily silenced
 except in times of deep sleep,
 or when the indwelling soul took control
 and roamed in the vasts of God. 752

And yet for all her moves in silencing
 her mind, while it lay quiescent
 for a while, it managed to bounce back soon,
 and start its mischief again. 753

She was vaguely conscious of a cosmic
 ordering that shaped our ends,
 for without that bond everything would have
 blasted itself long ago 754

But her grumbling mind demurred: How about
 the meddlers, the ambitious
 athletes of askesis always hell-bent
 on feathering their own nests? 755

A minute's concentration effected
 a tearing up of the veil
 behind the heart, the lid over the mind,
 and she saw the Face of Truth. 756

The aberrations, the strange contortions,
that had repelled her before,
fitted into slots of significance
and a concord seemed to reign. 757

Suddenly she felt seized, whirled and dissolved
in the ambient ether,
and what had appeared floating alien specks
seemed part of the harmony. 758

The anxious probings, the lacerations,
the insistent questionings,
the whole gymnastics of the intellect,
all had curled up for the nonce. 759

She was once more the blemishless Earth-born
Sita, Janaka's darling,
Dasaratha's daughter-in-law, Rama's
consort, and Ayodhya's Queen. 760

All inner disturbance stilled, all childish
and wasteful rebellion spent,
she felt in the great stillness of her room
the sovereign pressure of Grace. 761

It had been a tiring day for Sita
Sage Agastya's wide-ranging
revelations, by poking the compost
of the heaped-up yesterdays, 762

had reopened old sores, resurrected
forgotten aberrations —
and having recovered her poise and peace,
Sita now lapsed into sleep. 763

Passing from her declining wakefulness
through divers intermittent
states ranging from brief spasmodic nightmares
to paradisaal vistas, 764

and on to the perfect peace of dreamless
sleep where the dichotomies
dissolve, and the lone voyager arrives
at the true sanctuary; 765

yet one more, and the final translation,
the critical beyonding
of pointers, categories and the plunge
into the Turiya-Self. 766

BOOK SEVEN

ASHRAMA

Canto 67: Holy Wedded Love

- Another dawn, and the night retreated,
and sweet-voiced panegyrists
and well-trained musicians sang the praises
of Ayodhya's King and Queen : 1
- "O wake up, Kausalya's perennial joy,
wake up, O warrior King!
wake up, Maithili, Rama's royal Queen,
Janaka's darling daughter ! 2
- Wake up, valiant and gracious Rama,
wake up, O Earth-born Sita,
O wake up, for when you sleep, Ayodhya
sleeps, and all the world sleeps too." 3
- With Rama and Sita, the citizens
of Ayodhya, all living
creatures, and the denizens of the woods,
all greeted the new Sunrise. 4
- And so the day passed and other days passed
in the purposive rhythm
of involvement in good works readily
shouldered and executed. 5
- A constant stream of friendly visitors
to Ayodhya from other
kingdoms carried news of Rama Rajya
to the far ends of the world. 6
- The tidings spread that Rama's rule ensured
the reign of stern righteousness,
and the diffusion of prosperity,
contentment and happiness. 7
- The aged had a sense of fulfilment,
the young were buoyed up with zest
and hope. the divers classes eschewed greed,
and the women knew no fear. 8
- Rama had periodical reports
from his far-flung provinces
of the efflorescence of well-being
among the common people. 9

Nature preserved its normative cycles
 of continuity in change,
 and the winds blew gently, and the showers
 were timely and adequate. 10

Like the ordered movement of the seasons
 that held the year together,
 the day's activities too were governed
 by a pattern of their own. 11

In the forenoon, Rama busied himself
 with pressing affairs of state,
 conferring with elders and advisers,
 and sustaining the system, 12

while Sita made a round of the Temples,
 offered worship to the Gods,
 and fraternised with the common people
 in times of festivities. 13

Sita would daily visit Kausalya,
 Sumitra and Kaikeyi,
 and infer their needs and attend to them
 with her sisters' assistance. 14

Like the brothers, the Mithilan sisters,
 a quartette for a quartette:
 and they ensured the larger harmony
 by division of duties. 15

In the evenings, there was no dearth of time
 for varied sport and pastime,
 for relaxation or entertainment,
 for music, dance and drama. 16

The Asoka pleasance, Ayodhya's pride,
 with its spread of green and gold
 and wealth of flowers and birds, attracted
 royalty from time to time. 17

While the run of the seasons from summer
 to spring, skirting on the way
Varsha, Sharad, winter, *Sisira* meant
 a continuum of joy, 18

for the royal princes and their consorts,
 the auspicious *Sisira*
 was essentially the season of joy,
 dalliance and fulfilment. 19

And the royal garden was verily
 a spread of Nature's bounty,
 ravishing visitors with the assault
 of colour, form and fragrance 20

The munificence of trees — Asoka,
 sandalwood, mango, *Champak*,
mamāra, *māhua*, *kovidāra*,
 pārijāta, pomegranate 21

aye, trees that flowered in all six seasons
 and gave out celestial scents,
 trees laden with rose-apple and jack-fruit,
 or haunted by drunken bees: 22

and their branches heavy with foliage,
 golden, flame-white or pitch-dark,
 bowed over the pools with their sporting swans.
 lotus and lily in bloom. 23

There were well-laid terraces too, and flights
 of steps all the pools around,
 and the ensemble of the perfections
 recalled Indra's Nandana. 24

Some late afternoons Rama and Sita,
 tired of the forenoon's pressure
 of the conundrums of state policy
 or repetitive routine, 25

as if escaping from the familiar
 to the elusive unknown,
 would seek the much needed release from care
 in the heart of Asoka. 26

For Sita, it was doubly a tonic
 translation of the milieu:
 from palace to pleasance, and even more,
 from Lanka to Ayodhya. 27

That intolerable stretch of twelve months
 under the lone Simsupa
 and the shadow of the Chaitya Prasad
 in the Rakshasa's garden, 28

and now — what a great sea-change! — this total
 reversal of the milieu:
 from the hell that was Ravana's pleasance
 to this demi-paradise! 29

There were occasions unpredictable,
 rare, when drunk with apple-juice,
 they forgot all past regrets and future
 care, and cherished the present. 30

And sometimes, in the Utsava Ranga
 of the Asoka garden,
 they watched and applauded the dance and song
 of the nymph-like performers. 31

And the Rasikas in the audience,
 viewing Rama and Sita
 in their high presiding seats, would exclaim :
 "Vasishta ! Arundhati !" 32

Their life thus filled with the manifold tasks
 of sovereignty o'er the realm,
 and their private life in meditation,
 prayer and dedication, 33

Rama and Sita watched the autumn pass,
 the season of wayward clouds
 when the fields smile with ripening paddy
 and trees are burdened with fruit. 34

One afternoon, having had a tiring
 session with his ministers
 the whole forenoon, Rama retired early
 to his palace apartments. 35

Coming to know of his return, Sita
 made haste to join her husband,
 and as usual share with him the day's
 round of experiences. 36

Apparelled in one of her choicest robes,
 as Sita advanced amid
 the charmed spaces of the Raghu mansion
 and firmly approached her Lord, 37

there came the rush of a glorious hour,
 the scales fell, his eyes could see,
 and cherishing the gift of this vision,
 he rose and held out his hands. 38

As Sita, ravishing in her raiment
 and resplendent jewellery
 and overpowering with the fragrance
 that her beauty exuded, 39

received her Lord with joy as Sachi might
her Mahendra in heaven, •
and as Rama viewed his radiant wife
and the coming good fortune, 40

he exclaimed embracing her: "It's a new
Maithili I see today;
my dear earth-born bride of many a year,
I see you haloed in Light. 41

My darling wife of timeless time, what's this
splendour of sudden glory
that greatens you to Empyrean heights
and crowns you Mother Divine 42

This surely is a vigil behovely
with the sanction of the gods,
and promises some wondrous birth to come
augmenting the Raghu Line. 43

You are not Bride, you are more than Woman,
O my Sita, Vaidehi!
Mother of my unborn son, O Goddess!
you o'erwhelm me with rapture! 44

Thrice blessed Maithili, for this my son
you will soon be giving me,
what shall I do to show my gratitude,
what boon would you like to have?" 45

'Twas a moment of supreme fulfilment
for Maithili as well as
Raghava, and she felt profoundly moved
by his desire to please her. 46

Responding with a smile, Sita returned
these words: "Raghava, my Lord!
my deepest desire is to revisit
the forest hermitages. 47

I wish to prostrate before the Rishis,
the effulgent ones who live
austerely on Ganga's banks, and maintain
themselves on mere fruits and roots. 48

O Kakutstha, could I spend a single
penitential day at least
in the Mandala of the great Rishis,
my best wish would be fulfilled." 49

And Rama, with his talent for taking
instant decisions, replied:
“O Vaidehi! so be it: you can leave
tomorrow, and have your wish.” 50

Having thus consented to gratify
Sita's compelling desire
for re-visiting the hermitages
on the banks of the Ganga, 51

Rama seized the moment to reminisce
with nostalgic involvement
about their round of fruitful encounters
with the wise ones of the woods. 52

The wish she had spontaneously expressed
and with lucid clarity,
although it had sounded strange, but revealed
Sita's quintessential self. 53

She was the hallowed daughter of Bhūma
the patient compassionate
Mother, and she had shared her Lord's exile
for thirteen rewarding years. 54

The tempo and the sophisticated
mores of urban life, the pace
of living, the petrified hierarchies,
the glitter of affluence, 55

all seemed to pall after the first few months
of return to Ayodhya,
and her heart of yearning went out once more
to the forest verities. 56

Her articulated wish seemed to chime
with her elemental life,
her kinship with all flora and fauna
of the bountiful Mother. 57

And the elect forest inhabitants,
the inheritors of Light,
the ambassadors of the Absolute,
struck her as the living Gods. 58

The drapery of ritual, the soar
of the sacrificial Fire,
the loud reverberations of the chants,
the sumptuous oblations, 59

not these, or not these particularly,
 but the serene countenance,
 the eyes luminous with the Mind of Light
 and the heart of compassion: 60

it was that simple, austere and intense
 way of life bridging ardour
 and realisation, earth and heaven,
 that secured her adhesion. 61

In the knowledge that she was carrying
 her Rama's seed in her womb,
 'twas proper she should express the desire
 for a return to her Home! 62

The hoary holy heartland of the woods
 was her second home indeed
 reminiscent of her nativity
 in Videha's virgin Earth. 63

A retreat, however brief, in the woods,
 a meditative session
 in the Ashrama of a great Rishi,
 would prove the best fosterer. 64

Rama could at once read the mind behind
 the seemingly strange request.
 and his ready response clinched the matter,
 and Sita smiled gratefully. 65

Presently Rama gently disengaged
 himself from her warm embrace
 with a lingering smile, and found his way
 back to the Audience Hall. 66

Canto 68: Exiled Again

There was an assemblage of citizens
fairly representative
of Ayodhya's elite and Kosala's
countryside population. 67

Among the gathered gentry were seasoned
wits, conversationalists
and others known for their integrity,
tact and basic loyalty. 68

Mangala and Sumāgadha were there,
as also Dantavakra,
Vijaya, Madhumatta, Kasyapa,
Kula, Bhadra, Kāliya. 69

They spoke freely of current happenings
and related with relish
the exciting news from the rural parts
or amusing anecdotes. 70

It was for Rama and his company
a time of relaxation
when the give and take of privileged talk
brightened up the proceedings. 71

Now, as if casually, Rama inquired
what kind of talk went around
in town and country about the Royal
House and the Rama Rajya. 72

After all, said Rama, the reigning King,
being the observed of all,
was a ready subject for discussion,
and even for dissection. 73

It was proper, he added, he should know
the feeling of his people,
and be responsive to their reactions,—
not just take them for granted! 74

The first to speak was Bhadra: "Where's the need,
O King, to ask us? All speak
highly of you, and especially laud
your killing of Ravana." 75

- Not satisfied with this blanket report,
 Rama felt the worm of doubt
 burrow within, and asked with insistence
 that he should be told the truth. 76
- "It's proper I know the unvarnished truth,"
 said Rama defensively;
 "for unless I know it all, how may I
 rectify my shortcomings? 77
- No doubt all fulsome praise pleases the ear,
 while censure, though justified,
 hurts one's self-esteem; but speak without fear,
 'I can rise above myself.' 78
- A grim silence descended for a while
 before Bhadra found his voice,
 but he spoke in halting accents as if
 against his better judgement: 79
- "Since you give me no option, my lord King,"
 Bhadra said with folded hands,
 "I'll tell the whole truth with nothing left out,
 nor aught spoken in malice. 80
- Our citizenry are a mixed lot,
 and as the mood seizes them
 they talk freely in places of public
 resort like Squares and Mainstreets, 81
- shopping centres, gardens and pleasancess,
 river banks, forest retreats,
 even in the hallowed vicinity
 of temples and prayer-halls. 82
- People praise your wondrous feat of bridging
 the sea to attain Lanka,
 extol your destruction of Ravana
 and his Rakshasa forces; 83
- citizens laud your sovereignty over
 Rakshasa and Vanara
 your triumphant return to Ayodhya,
 and the great Coronation. 84
- But, then, it is also bruited about —
 people being what they are
 and given to loose talk — that 'twas not wise
 to instal Sita as Queen. 85

The Rakshasa had carried her away
 and kept her in Asoka
 for a year, and men wonder how you could
 accept her as Queen again. 86

If such be the standard set by the King,
 the people ask, what hope for
 commonalty—there can now be no norms
 regulating married life. 87

Such is the tenor of the loose gossip
 among the people in town
 and countryside alike," he concluded,
 and sullenly held his peace. 88

After a painful pause, Rama turned round
 as he reeled under the blow,
 and asked the others assembled whether
 they had anything to say. 89

"It's as Bhadra says," they answered briefly,
 but one, Mangala, added:
 "This is but the gossip of the men-folk;
 women may have other thoughts." 90

"That's certainly true," put in Kasyapa;
 "Sita sits high in the hearts
 of the women of Kosala, who see
 in her suffering their own." 91

Emboldened by this apt intervention,
 the mature Madhumatta
 added: "This derogation by the vile,
 the irresponsible ones, 92

the idle pedlars of loose talk and lies,
 must be well balanced against
 the vast unanimity of silent
 love and worship of the Queen. 93

And, O King, the informed and enlightened
 remember the miracle
 of the great fire ordeal in Lanka
 and laud her as a goddess. 94

It's not for us, O King, to give credence
 to the stutter of malice
 in ignorance of the religion
 of silent adoration." 95

But Rama, dazed for the nonce by Bhadra's
unequivocal report,
ended the meeting, sent his friends away,
and went deep into himself. 96

This revelation of the people's mind
had come with a suddenness
rather devastating, and Rama felt
besieged by conflicting thoughts. 97

He knew his Sita; she was carrying
his unborn child, she had blazed
her Truth in the language of leaping flames
that named her chaste and holy. 98

But confronted as he was by a dark
inconscience that was the sum
of human folly, prejudice and spite,
he felt his certitudes fail. 99

Frailty was apt to feed upon itself,
make frailty the law of life,
deny the upward spiral, and scoff at
the leap into the future. 100

The Rakshasa with his phenomenal
might of arms and askesis
was easier to destroy than human
folly, pettiness and spite. 101

Rama was on the rack asking himself
whether he should abandon
his blameless Queen, or opt for a second
exile, and this time for life. 102

He was alas! no private citizen
with freedom to exercise
in full measure the right to free thinking,
open discourse and action. 103

He was of the hoary Ikshvaku race,
he had to keep untarnished
his public image, he mustn't quail under
the whiplash of this censure. 104

No way of shedding his Kingship either,
for 'twas not negotiable,
and yet a second brutal betrayal
of his wife and son's mother — 105

another rejection must for ever
 blacken his humanity,
 cast a total blight on his wedded life
 and drive his Queen to despair. 106

Sita wasn't like other women; she was
 holy and fair, commanding
 and compassionate, suffering nothing
 while suffering everything. 107

He had sometimes wondered whether Sita
 the mysterious Earth-born
 wasn't at once his talisman and his test,
 his brightest crown and his cross! 108

He could of course reject her; that would mean
 denying himself the Grace
 and Glory of wedded bliss in exchange
 for the crown-simulacrum. 109

Perhaps, for one like him thus entangled
 in the coils of destiny,
 the worse choice would be the manlier one:
 let the crown exact its price! 110

No, no, he wouldn't let Sita, the mother
 of the future Kakutstha,
 stay on to provoke more comment; nor could
 he abandon Ayodhya. 111

All the spread of green earth would sustain her
 wherever Sita might be;
 as for himself, like purblind Ayodhya,
 he too was rejecting Grace. 112

No worse, there was no deeper pouch of hell;
 and having made up his mind,
 his heart heavy and his eyes dimmed with tears,
 Rama sent for his brothers. 113

The urgency of the summons brought them
 promptly to the King's presence,
 and the Prince found Rama bleached by grief,
 a lotus without its shine. 114

Having then hugged and seated his brothers
 Rama unburdened himself:
 "You are the life of my life, O my own,
 and now must you stand by me. 115

I've heard that people in town and country
denigrate me for bringing
Sita to share the throne with me, and this
has wounded my self-esteem.* 116

You don't know, Bharata and Satrugna,
but Lakshmana knows it all,
how brave Maithili shared our forest life,
how ~~R~~Ravana played the thief, 117

how I killed him and rescued her, and when
I had foolish nagging doubts,
she entered the fire and triumphantly
blazoned forth her purity. 118

Thus it was I received her in Lanka
my faith fully reinforced,
and we made the flight in the Pushpaka
and were crowned here with due rites. 119

But now this vile talk is abroad, and wings
its way everywhere, and I'm
censured for not setting an example
that's above all suspicion. 120

And, besides, my Sita's pregnant with
my son, and this vicious talk,
as it gains further bite and currency,
can cause her deep psychic hurt. 121

An insurrection has raged within me,
mind and heart have pulled apart,
and although I feel exhausted and crushed,
I now seem to see my way. 122

It's worse than a death sentence to say it,
but that's the tenor of fate:
I've sworn to send her away and save her
from this putrid atmosphere. 123

The first thing in the morning, Lakshmana,
you should take Sita away,
and leave her near Valmiki's Ashrama
nestling close to the Ganga. 124

She has herself expressed the wish to see
the hermitages around
and offer obeisance to the Rishis;
let her now have her desire. 125

This is a crucial decision in which
 I don't want to involve you:
 all the opprobrium be on my head —
 that's the edict of my fate!" 126

This ruled out all discussion and delay,
 and although stunned to silence,
 an elemental protest stirred within,
 and Lakshmana found his voice: 127

"'Twas my role in Lanka, when you first spurned
 the immaculate Sita,
 to start the fire out of which she emerged
 so scatheless and resplendent. 128

Again, my Lord, you command me to cast
 this Pearl away, who's purer,
 richer, than all the tribe of humankind:
 so be it, if that's my lot. 129

My mother asked me, when I followed you,
 to deem you my father, and
 Sita my mother: oh the heartless way
 I must play the filial role! 130

But let me say this, my Lord; if gossip
 can drive you to this resolve,
 it will in turn generate more gossip,
 no less idle and vicious. 131

It behoves the royal Ikshvaku House
 that, as Tiger among Men,
 you should dismiss all gossip with contempt
 and take your stand on Dharma." 132

But Raghava had nothing more to say,
 and his face set and his cyes
 bedaubed with tears, he retired for the night,
 and his brothers went away. 133

In the privacy of his room, Rama
 found that sleep eluded him,
 and he tried in vain to rationalise
 his pitiless decision. 134

He had received her at Janaka's hands,
 and in foul and fair climate
 alike, she had shared his life and fulfilled
 her great father's commandment. 135

- Was it no more than self-love or wounded
vanity or cowardice
that determined the monstrous decision
to throw Sita to the wolves? 136
- Did it matter, what now happened to him, --
the loss of nerve, the deceit
he was practising upon Maithili,
the revolt in Lakshmana, 137
- the silent protest in the disciplined
Bharata and Satrughna?
There was no holding back now, for he felt
driven irresistibly. 138
- Rama knew well enough how the people --
the same who condemned him now! --
would brand him, and aye, for all future time,
the most heartless of husbands. 139
- He had the hunch -- an inner certitude
told him -- that Sita would be
far safer in Valmiki's Ashrama
than in hostile Ayodhya 140
- But this was sheer brazen self-approval:
why not face the ugly truth
he was playing a cheap trick on his wife,
almost stabbing on the sly! 141
- While Sita had desired to revisit
the Ashramas and offer
obeisance to the Rishis, she would now
be dumped as waste in the woods! 142
- Oh the drastic difference, -- as between
the bracing airs of Heaven
and the chill blasts of Hell! -- no, Rama felt,
it wouldn't bear thinking about. 143
- And he hadn't given her a chance to speak,
or even to meet her judge!
Was he afraid of her accusing eyes?
or their striking sudden fire? 144
- There was, then, the splendour of her nascent
motherhood that haloed her
with an incandescent glow of beauty:
he would have quailed before it! 145

He recalled how she had followed him like
 his shadow to the forest:
 such wifely adhesion! And now he was 146
 wrenching and casting her off!

He had presented a brave enough front
 before his anguished brothers,
 but violent were the deep-sea currents
 underneath the surface calm. 147

He was under the assault of rival
 emotions and loyalties,
 his heart's throbs and the Home's call, smothered by
 the push and pride of duty. 148

Let the world speak about him what it will, —
 self-righteous, priggish, callous,
 more concerned with his own public image
 than a woman's bleeding soul! 149

And the more he debated, the more fierce
 were the heart's lacerations
 and he cried, "Time, you must rectify this,
 and see Sita to safety!" 150

The Brothers — Bharata and Satrugna,
 and Lakshmana most of all —
 spent similar sleepless nights, and the dawn
 wore a dull and dismal look. 151

Grief-stricken and reprehending his role,
 Lakshmana asked Sumantra
 to bring the royal chariot to take
 Sita to the Ashramas. 152

When presently the splendid chariot
 drew up before the palace,
 Saumitri informed Sita, who promptly
 responded and took her seat. 153

How sweet of Rama, she thought, that so soon
 he should have arranged for her
 promised visit to the hermitages
 of the sanctified Rishis. 154

She was taking some jewellery with her,
 and choice robes too; they could be
 offered to the spouses of the Rishis
 while making her obeisance. 155

But the chariot had not gone far when
Sita felt deeply disturbed
by a rush of bad omens, as also
Lakshmana's sad countenance. 156

"O Saumitri!" she said in sore distress,
"look at the baneful omens
that come not single but in families!
My eyes twitch, and I shudder. 157

The wide earth seems drained of joy, and terror
seems poised to spring upon me!
May all be well with Rama, and his kin:
and may God save Kosala!" 158

Lakshmana prayed, "May all end as God wills!".
and driving on, they rested
for the night in one of the Ashramas
on the banks of Gomati. 159

Next morning they drove towards the Ganga,
and reaching it by mid-day
and finding it in full flood, they engaged
a boat which roved them across. 160

Soon disembarking on the other shore,
Saumitri almost broke down
as he said weeping: "I wish I had died
rather than do what I must. 161

For my part today in carrying out
my Brother's cruel order,
I shall be reviled in ages to come
as a piece of wickedness. 162

But judge me not by the mere look of things,
O compassionate Mother!"
With this desperate appeal, Lakshmana
fell with a thud before her. 163

Moved by the sight of her prostrate Brother,
Sita spoke protectively:
"Tell me, Saumitri, what hard commission
the King has laid upon you." 164

Thus encouraged as well as commanded
by Sita, Lakshmana rose,
and still unable to face her, he spoke
with wet eyes and a parched throat: 165

“While conversing with his friends, the King heard
 of the malicious scandal
 spread in town and country about your life
 in Lanka’s Asoka Grove. 166

My tongue will not repeat the vile gossip,
 and I spurn it with contempt,
 for the fire-baptism in Lanka blazed
 your chastity before all. 167

But, touched in the raw, the King has ordered
 you should be left at a place
 near the Ashrama of Sage Valmiki,
 who was Dasaratha’s friend. 168

You too seem to have expressed a desire
 to visit the settlement
 of hermitages beyond the Ganga,
 and right here is Valmiki’s. 169

Do not give way to despair, Maithili,
 nor judge Rama too harshly,
 for the noble soul, like an oven stopped,
 is self-consumed to cinders. 170

You’ll receive from all-knowing Valmiki
 a paternal reception;
 and under his aegis, may you endure
 as Sita the unsullied.” 171

Lakshmana’s speech in faltering accents
 threw Maithili none the less
 into a paroxysm of grief, and
 she collapsed and lay senseless. 172

Reviving soon after, she spoke in pain
 and distress, her eyes blinded
 by tears: “Surely the Creator decreed
 I should be sold to sorrow, 173

and be the Madonna of Misery,
 aye, incarnate suffering.
 Did I in some previous birth divorce
 spouses from one another? 174

Forest life was endurable before,
 for Rama was by my side;
 but denied his company, how shall I
 face my uncertain future? 175

Should the Sages in the hermitages
ask me why I am banished,
what answer can I return, and can I
then sustain my self-respect? 176

You may not know, Saumitri, for never
have you seen me face to face,
and only my feet catch your eyes as you
render obeisance to me. 177

But Rama himself knows that I carry
his seed, and my condition
is both delicate and compromising —
and to be cast away now! 178

Separated from those I love, and made
vulnerable by my state,
how shall I face the whips and scorns of time
and eke out the days now left? 179

I could end my existence by a leap
into the Ganga waters
were it not that my husband's royal Line
may terminate with my death. 180

Perhaps, Saumitri, you misunderstood
my Rama's real intentions . . .
oh no! I am but a drowning woman
trying to clutch at a straw! 181

Let me not in my sore distress pile up
this presumptuous insult
on the unpardonable hurt I caused
that day in Panchavati. 182

That fateful mid-day eclipse engineered
by Ravana, and twelve months
of miserable waiting! Another
darkness now, and for how long? 183

But Saumitri, I can see how you feel:
you've no rancour towards me,
you're weighed down by intolerable grief, —
already you've halved my pain! 184

Indeed your grief is far greater than mine,
O Saumitri beyond praise!
for still you seem to be matching my pain
with Rama's own self-torture. 185

In the face of this sudden reversal
 from supreme felicity
 to fathomless gloom, what can avail us
 except submission and hope? 186

Leave me to my fate, then, O Saumitri,
 and return to Ayodhya;
 convey my salutations to the King,
 and also the Queen-Mothers. 187

Remember me to silent Urmila
 and efficient Mandavi
 and irrepressible Srutakirti:
 tell them I'll endure somehow. 188

And, Saumitri, give this parting message
 to my Lord of Righteousness:
 'You know I am blameless, chaste and truthful,
 and desire only your good. 189

I know it's your fear that has thrown me out
 lest your fair name be muddied:
 if my expulsion can sustain your name,
 so be it, I'm quite content. 190

But, my Lord, nurse no resentment against
 the people, but serve them well,
 and they will give up spewing more scandals
 and ravaging other lives. 191

For a woman, her husband is her god,
 friend, comrade and counsellor;
 I will therefore do what pleases my Lord,
 aye, give up all joy of life?" 192

Overwhelmed by conflicting emotions,
 Lakshmana made obeisance,
 circumambulated, and silently
 withdrew to the waiting boat. 193

When the raft arrived at the other bank,
 the sorrowing Saumitri
 stepped down, rejoined the anxious Sumantra,
 and casting a backward glance, 194

they could see Sita still standing alone,
 forlorn, and shaken by sobs;
 and she too seemed to be looking distraught
 at their shadowy figures. 195

Canto 69: The Ashrama Sanctuary

So that was the finish of a chapter,
and what next, Sita wondered;
and seized by one more spasm of despair
she shook like a basil leaf. 196

Some of the children of the settlement
who happened to see Sita
in her extremity of misery
rushed to report to the Sage: 197

‘We’ve seen, O Master, a lady regal
and beautiful like Lakshmi
near our Ashrama, and she is weeping
aloud uncontrollably. 198

She seemed to us a descended goddess
shaped in the image of grief:
take pity on this high-souled one, Master,
and give her asylum here.” 199

Muni Valmiki went into a trance
and saw the whole flow of Time
at a glance, and knew at once the Shakti
knocking at his hermitage. 200

He briskly walked with *argya* offerings
to the gateway where she stood,
and speaking with transparent tenderness
put her instantly at ease: 201

“Welcome, Dasaratha’s daughter-in-law,
welcome, Janaka’s daughter,
welcome, Rama’s chaste and thrice blessed spouse,
welcome to my Ashrama. 202

In my trance of transcendental seeing
I know why I find you here:
you’re sinless and pure and holy, Sita;
abide with us here in peace. 203

In our Ashrama, there are cottages
where women-anchorites live;
you’ll find protection and safety with them,
as a child with her parents. 204

Cast aside dejection and anxiety,
 receive this *argya* from me:
 think of my Ashrama as your own home —
 may your tribulations end.” 205

This was wondrous balm to her wounded soul,
 and Sita, in gratitude
 and deep reverence, said with folded hands:
 “I shall do as you suggest.” 206

Now as they walked towards the main entrance,
 some of the hermitresses
 met them half-way and offered obeisance
 to the Rishi, who explained: 207

“This is the chaste Sita, wife of Rama
 and daughter of Janaka;
 rejected unjustly by her husband,
 the sinless Sita is here. 208

It's your duty to show her the honour
 due to her glory of birth
 and state, extend your affection and love,
 and give her all attention.” 209

The women-anchorites were overwhelmed
 to receive their precious charge,
 and Sita, feeling relieved, followed them,
 and the Muni went his way. 210

And Lakshmana too, from his chariot
 on the far side, having seen
 Maithili entering the Ashrama,
 resumed his homeward journey. 211

In the days that followed, Maithili lived
 in a kind of vacant daze
 as if unable to recover from
 the trauma she had sustained. 212

From what had seemed summit felicity,
 thus to be dropped and cast down:
 all glory and joy of Empire exchanged
 for this dolour in exile! 213

But Muni Valmiki's paternal stance:
 could Janaka have done more?
 And as for her known-unknown Earth-Mother,
 she was always close at hand: 214

in Mithila and far-flung Videha,
 in Kosala's expanses,
 in the rough and tumble of Dandaka,
 or in alien Asoka: 215

and now in these invigorating grounds!
 Wherever fate, whim or chance
 had pushed her around, she had felt the clasp
 of her mother, Madhavi! 216

And Sita, long distracted by the thought
 of the sudden reversal
 in her way of life, felt it a blessing
 she was in this sanctuary. 217

Finding her jewellery mere surplusage
 she decided to shed them,
 and wore the simple clothing that became
 a dweller in the forest 218

Everyone was kind and considerate
 as though they would, if they could,
 take on themselves her shock and load of pain
 and immunise her from hurt. 219

She paid obeisance whenever the Sage
 took his rounds near her dwelling,
 and the friendly women inmates, as if
 taking turns, looked after her 220

One in particular, Vasumati,
 conversed through her silences,
 and when she chose to speak, her sparse words caused
 reverberations of pain. 221

What's this throbbing sisterhood in sorrow,
 what unplumbed depths of defeat,
 what hidden continents of suffering,
 what lone summits of disgrace! 222

But Sita, while melting with a mother's
 tenderness, had no desire
 to probe Vasumati's heart of anguish,
 and left it to her own choice 223

And indeed there came a pensive evening
 when the sad-eyed one unveiled,
 defying her sighs and tears, the contours
 of her star-crossed history. 224

“O Sita, I can never understand,”
 said the sad Vasumati,
 “why the all puissant and omniscient gods
 scatter their boons so freely. 225

There was Ravana, who won from Brahma
 unconscionable powers,
 so he could seize and carry you away;
 and sorrow wraps you up still! 226

And there was Madhu, who won from Rudra
 a Trident invincible;
 and coming to his son Lavana's hands,
 it has made him a monster. 227

He has been a scourge of the Ashramas,
 and has made them a shambles;
 he has butchered and eaten my parents,
 and I alone could escape. 228

Perhaps he reserved me for a worse fate
 and let me out of his grasp,
 and fleeing from that scene of butchery
 I strayed into this shelter. 229

The things I've seen, and heard; the manifold
 mutilations, screams, spectres,
 for all the Muni's redeeming presence,
 how shall I face the future? 230

This darkened life denuded of savour,
 this waking nightmarish life
 sans meaning, sans hope of resurrection,
 why don't I get sick of it? 231

Was it, then, beyond the ken of the gods
 that Ravana — Lavana —
 armed with massive potencies would commit
 such heinous atrocities? 232

Like splitting headache this 'Why' 'WHY' bombards
 my half benumbed consciousness,
 and it's as though I'm ever on the brink,
 slipping, falling or dying. 233

The Muni is compassion unfailing,
 the hermitresses don't ask
 questions that lacerate, and I've in you
 consanguinity in pain 234

But the 'Why' persists like a dull drum-beat,
 I see no sense or logic
 in the ordering of this sinful earth,
 and I've no more room for Hope!" 235

Sita held in her arms the collapsing
 Vasumati, and herself
 pushed to the edge of despair, none the less
 spoke with a supreme effort: 236

"You speak, Vasu, as sometimes in my blues
 I've railed too, being driven
 by my oppressive thoughts, and losing my
 deeper sense of perspective. 237

There was a time in the Asoka Grove
 when I wished to take my life,
 yet all changed suddenly, and a bright dawn
 chased the darkest night away. 238

The Sun-God in his radiant splendour
 seems to fill but little space,
 yet his rays' scattering brightens the sky
 and we see the entire world. 239

In a life spread over many a year,
 the paradisa! moments
 may be few, but their memory sustains
 the long and bleak march of Time. 240

Flux, not stasis, is the law of our life,
 and if the imperatives
 of cyclic change and rhythmic flow ordain
 these reversals in our lives, 241

by the same edict, does it not follow
 that we fall only to rise,
 we're worsted but to revive tomorrow,
 aye, we die to wake again. 242

Just as it cannot be day all the time,
 neither is it always night;
 if now it's darkest night, let's call the Light
 within and redeem the time. 243

Oases of felicity, far between
 and few, stand out in our lives;
 they're our insurance in our worst of times,
 so we may safely come through. 244

Besides, this our present life is neither
 the beginning nor the end;
 we're caught in a cosmic complexity,
 and we cannot see it all. 245

Nothing is gained, Vasu, by defying
 what we cannot comprehend;
 since you've supped full of horrors, why not cling
 to the rare moments of joy?" 246

Vasumati held back her tears, pondered
 for a while and said: "Devi,
 I would have spurned such advice from others,
 but it is gospel from you. 247

We're fellow pilgrims of adversity
 and should cheer each other; and
 ambrosial memories do surge sometimes
 and shove aside the nightmares. 248

Beyond the murkiness of the slaughter
 of my parents, I can see
 the light of love in my mother's eyes, and
 the glow on my father's face. 249

And I remember too the visiting
 Bhargava, our brief meeting,
 and the tremor of joy that lingered on
 for many a trembling day. 250

But after the Lavana holocaust
 I lost sight of my hero;
 I remember only the Asura's
 fiendish grins and killer-hows." 251

After this exchange of fevered pulses
 a calm settled between them,
 and they could meet henceforth in this new-forged
 concordat of sufferance. 252

In the weeks that followed, Vasumati
 received Sita's healing touch,
 and knowing her condition, felt concerned
 and kept constant company. 253

For Sita, Vasu was a reflection,
 and through their prolonged sessions
 of remembrance of things past, they grew wise,
 and sad, and humble by turns. 254

“How little we know!” said Maithili once,
 “fair and foul seem intertwined;
 out of evil, good; out of good, evil;
 where, then, are our certitudes? 255

Vasu, as I carry my Rama's seed
in my womb, and all I do
and think and feel must shape the future child
the scion of the Raghus, 256

I sometimes feel, and I feel more and more,
that this penitential air -
rather than Kosala's fumes of scandal---
best suits my predicament.

Sure there's some obscure and intricate web
woven by the cosmic gods,
and while the ego exults or demurs,
the self is lost in the All." 258

Now as the days grew into weeks and months,
the serene and holy air
of Valmiki's Ashrama brought about
a subtle change in Sita. 259

The resonances of the Vedic chants,
the fires fed with oblations,
the presence of the high-souled Sage, all charged
the place with power and peace.

She had grown a seasoned stranger to sleep
in those months in Asoka,
and that abnormality now threatened
to become native again.

Parted from Rama, wasn't it perpetual
Night with its dream-sequences
and apocalyptic vistas holding
her surface self to ransom?

Since the brightest day was night dark enough,
even the darkest night had
no terrors for her, for she could invoke
the corrective Light within.

Sometimes on nights of oppressive stillness
she would hear strains unearthly
breaking the solemn silence and stealing
o'er the Ashrama spaces.

From what music of the spheres o'erflowing
did they tune to earthly air?

The music so wordless, almost soundless,
like an unstruck melody! 265

Listening with rapt consecration, Sita
would feel melted and dissolved
and lose the distinction between meaning
and music, sound and silence. 266

Maithili had heard from Vasumati
that the voice so compelling,
the accents so reverberent, the tune
so subtly insinuating, 267

those liquid cadences emanated
from a secluded harbour
where Nādōpāsini the hermitress
communed with Nāda-Brahman. 268

She dwelt in the far untrodden countries
of the ineluctable,
and when the afflatus was in high tide
she sang with pure abandon. 269

She had mastered her art in the cradle
much as song-birds do taking
their cue from their forest-ranging mothers
winging in the morning sky. 270

Her own father had been one of Nature's
darling sons, inheriting
a melodic tradition going back
to great Narada himself. 271

Since her earliest girlhood awareness,
Nadopasini had coaxed
her complex faculties and disciplined
the stirrings of her psychic, 272

till the whole world of desires and pressures
had seemed to go up in smoke,
and only sound remained as the body,
heart-beat, will and soul of all. 273

Sita had once strayed towards the cottage
drawn by a strange impulsion,
and had seen Nadopasini's spiral
of musical ecstasy. 274

circling and rising higher and higher
 as if with a physical
 reality, and beyonding diverse •
 intermediate zones and realms — 275

and her left arm held firm the Tambura,
 her fingers sustained the bass
 and the waves of the awakening bliss
 flooded the soul-universe. 276

Wordless, and therefore transcending meaning,
 'twas like a heady climb from
 the sacrificial altar, all five fires
 coalescing in the ascent. 277

She sat impassive while a glow suffused
 all her being, and she seemed
 oblivious of place and time, and with her
 eyes closed, moved only her lips. 278

The spiralling, ascending, aspiring
 fire-purified melody,
 the compulsive cry and call for response,
 evoked the answering rain. 279

Wasn't the self-lost ecstatic, Sita thought,
 a paraclete mediator
 between the prisoners of pain below
 and the Redeemer above? 280

The askesis of self-dissolution
 in musical offering
 now concluded, her lids parted, she saw
 Maithili standing, and smiled. 281

She rose, and Sita walked unsteadily
 towards her, but smiling through
 tears, they forged a deeper communion, like
 a mother and her daughter. 282

"Maithili, we're daughters of distress all,"
 she said, "yet this our *tapas*
 being the alchemy of sufferance
 can open our eyes to God." 283

The elder knew already the saga
 of Sita's tribulations,
 and as for her own, Nadopasini's
 life had been a blank, a void! 284

It was a meeting of kindred spirits,
 a doubling of sanctities
 and silences, an insurance for both
 in future extremities. 285

Now with the passing of summer the rains
 came, and the Sravana month;
 and the elder hermitresses could scent
 the approaching confinement. 286

One evening Vasumati came in haste
 with the news that Satrugna,
 Prince of Ayodhya, was with the Muni,
 and they were in deep converse: 287

“He has made obeisance to the Rishi
 and asked for a night’s shelter;
 and the Muni had told the Prince to treat
 the Ashrama as his home. 288

On Satrugna asking about the grounds
 adjoining our Ashrama,
 the Sage related the great Sacrifice
 performed by King Saudāsa; 289

how inadvertently he roused the wrath
 of his high priest, Vasishta,
 and how the chaste Madayanti, his Queen,
 retrieved her Lord from himself! 290

For some twelve years, the King was afflicted
 with feet of stone, then the curse
 spent itself out by grace of the high priest,
 and the King ruled a long time. 291

Saudasa was one of the Raghu race,
 and the grounds of his Yajna
 now fringed the Muni’s spacious Ashrama
 like an auspicious cover. 292

From his words it appears that Satrugna
 will depart westward at dawn,
 and crossing the Yamuna, he will fight
 the fell demon, Lavana. 293

They’re still conversing in anxious whispers,
 but I feel so excited,
 Sita, for this must be Lavana’s end,
 and happy times are ahead.” 294

Canto 70: **Motherhood and Fulfilment**

- Satrughna's arrival and his mission
of conquest of Lavana
generated in Sita a tremor
of hope and expectancy, 295
- and fond and familiar visions floated
in the lively corridors
of her reawakening consciousness,
and she was hardly herself. 296
- She withdrew into her inner countries
and thought she witnessed once more
the panoramic progress of her life—
childhood, girlhood, and at last 297
- the ordained moment of recognition
in the Sacrificial Hall
where Rama came with twin-like Saumitri
along with Visvamitra. 298
- Her inner eye aglow with leaping lights
took the essential measure
of the months of wedded felicity
in Ayodhya,— thereafter 299
- the long instructive years in Dandaka
visiting the Ashramas,
skirting the sundry perilous enclaves,
and communing with Nature! 300
- And once more a shudder passed through Sita
as she lived that fateful day
in Panchavati, and her self-forged bonds,
and the months in Asoka. 301
- A fleeting minute out of the pauseless
ebb and flow of ceaseless Time,
and all was then bleak and dreary, without
hope of regeneration. 302
- And another heave of the sea of Time,
and there was the miracle
of yet one more Dawn and burst of New Life
and the explosion of joy. 303

Madhu, madhu, honey, Sita muttered,
 oh the nectar in p \acute{o} ison,
 the light in the dark cavern, the new life
 in the throes of killing pain! 304

Suddenly Maithili let out a scream,
 and Vasu was quite alarmed,
 but the hermitresses knew that the hour
 of Nativity was near. 305

It was close on midnight when Maithili
 was delivered of twin boys,
 and she seemed a reclining goddess bathed
 in the bliss of fulfilment. 306

Two Ashrama boys conveyed the glad news
 to the resting Valmiki,
 and anon the Muni arrived and blessed
 Sita and her god-like twins. 307

He took a few *darbha* grass stalks with tops,
 pronounced all the prescribed spells
 and asked the attending woman to brush
 the twin children in due form. 308

The child born first was now touched with the tops
 and given the name 'Kusa';
 the one born later was brushed with the stalks
 and came to be called 'Lava'. 309

While Satrughna, having met the Muni
 and taken the offered fruits
 and roots, was resting for the night, he heard
 the woman's intoning words. 310

Rama's name and *gotra* were repeated,
 and the names 'Kusa', 'Lava';
 and Satrughna knew that Rama was blest,
 and he approached the harbour. 311

"God be praised, O Mother," said Satrughna
 offering his obeisance;
 "It's Grace Abounding that I can now greet
 this noble pair of Raghus." 312

He could say no more, and she was silent;
 he gazed long at the children
 reading their father's and mother's image,
 and the Divine's ordering. 313

“At dawn, Mother,” he said at last, “I go
westward on Rama’s command,
and may your Grace see me end Lavana’s
blood-boltered reign of terror.” 314

Feebly answered Sita: “O Satrughna,
‘ti’s a blessing you are here:
may you prove victor o’er the Asura,
and give peace back to the realm.” 315

She apprised him also of the hapless
Vasumati, and her lost
Bhargava, and Grace might now bring about
the long delayed reunion. 316

Parting after this auspicious meeting,
while Satrughna felt fulfilled
albeit a nameless sadness lingered still,
Maithili exuded peace. 317

She had done wisely, she felt; she had fought
despair and spurned the death-wish
when her wedded life had crashed on the rocks,
and she was a castaway. 318

The bliss of fulfilment in motherhood!
the cry of the just-born babe!
aye, at the very heart of the eclipse,
still shines the resplendent Sun! 319

The reckless whimsicality of fate:
the pendulous swing between
wormwood now, and the pomegranate anon —
the kick, and then the caress! 320

The drama-sequence with its gestation
in Kosala’s Ayodhya,
its turning point at the Ashrama-gate,
has found its completion now! 321

In the conduct of life, mused Maithili,
what was the worst of vices
but impatience finding self-expression
through precipitate action? 322

When defeat o’ertakes the prospect of joy,
‘tis alone the askesis
of suffering that distils out in time
the elixir of delight. 323

Veiling her exhaustion, a serene joy
 gave a subdued new lustre
 to her tender limbs, and she felt the need
 for a brief season of sleep. 324

When duly at dawn Satrugghna commenced
 his westering journey, his
 introspection ranged from past to future,
 and a robust faith returned. 325

Hadn't the sainted compassionate Muni
 promulgated the Charter
 that the Ashrama was truly a Home
 for the royal Raghu race? 326

Aye, mused Satrugghna, wasn't the Ashrama
 verily Ayodhya's soul?
 And Mother Sita was soul of the soul,
 and the new Raghus, her twins! 327

He fared forward in his righteous campaign
 more than ever confident
 that the Asuric blight would be ended
 and rule of Dharma restored. 328

Maithili too, now pensively drifting
 in a sea of memories,
 seemed able to take a wide-ranging view
 of past, present and future, 329

and regrets, resentments, exultations
 led nowhere, it seemed; only
 Grace kept one afloat somehow, like a leaf
 unsinkable in the storm. 330

She was conscious all her yesteryears found
 their meaning in the present,
 which in its turn forged its seminal links
 with all that's yet to be born. 331

Here on the left, the past, and its tally
 of fulfilments and failures;
 and here on the right, the unborn future:
 the present justifies all. 332

And so Maithili, tired but contented,
 rested in peace for a while,
 and now refreshed and happy, was ready
 for the tasks of motherhood. 333

In the days, weeks, following, answering
 their mother's cry for a cure
 of the sad earth's inveterate longings,
 the boys grew in shine and shade. 334

Oft it seemed to Maithili that they bridged
 the gulf between her lone self
 and Rama on his throne in Ayodhya
 lonely in his sovereignty. 335

The months sped swiftly past the childhood years,
 and Kusa and Lava, charged
 with a power potent and redemptive,
 seemed the chosen of the gods. 336

They were unaware of their royal birth
 or their glorious lineage;
 and had, as became Ashrama children,
 fostering from the Muni. 337

And their mother, Sita, while she watched them
 grow petal after petal
 of their blossoming consciousness, master
 the whole art and science of life, 338

and dare the future with self-confidence,
 she underwent on her own
 a transfiguration of her being
 as the Genius of the place. 339

News of the far-flung outside world seldom
 penetrated the precincts
 of that area of tranquillity
 and reached the sheltered inmates. 340

But there were the rare exceptions, as when
 news trickled that Satrugghna
 had killed Lavana and imposed his own
 righteous rule over the realm. 341

And 'twas the young Bhargava, Vasu's love,
 now providentially out
 of Lavana's dungeon, that brought the news
 and made spring-time bloom again. 342

Bhargava became one of the closest
 of Valmiki's disciples,
 and like Vasu herself, paid attention
 to the welfare of the twins. 343

For many days and nights in succession,
 whether awake or asleep,
 Maithili's consciousness felt invaded
 by memories of Lanka. 344

The evil and the good, the repulsive
 and the alluring, the raw
 and the ripe, the absurd and the sublime,
 were all jumbled together. 345

And the paradox of their commingling,
 the stings and stabbings of Time,
 the grim perversions and alternations—
 and the timely rain of Grace! 346

The shape of the self-wrought calamity,
 the irrelevant beauty
 of the Asoka Grove, the loneliness,
 helplessness and hopelessness! 347

While she had, as much by her own folly
 as by Ravana's craven
 duplicity and congenital lust,
 sold herself to misery, 348

she had seen at the worst extremities
 the intervention of Grace:
 Trijata, Anala, and Sarama,
 aye Mandodari herself! 349

She knew all speculations were idle,
 there were no ready answers,
 and the best of men at the best of times
 could be seized with lunacy. 350

Who could have expected that Kaikeyi
 the lounging soft-spoken dame
 would turn into a malignant fury
 and drive her husband to death? 351

Ah what came over herself, asked Sita,
 that giving up an Empire
 she lost her foolish heart to a mere toy
 and played the froward spoilt child! 352

And even worse, for her ravings against
 exemplary Sāumitri
 had only left her defenceless, a prey
 to Ravana when he came. 353

The crest of it all was Rama's outburst:
 ah why had that paragon
 of sweet seasoned speech to turn violent
 and splash boiling oil on her? 354

There was no end to such introspection,
 and the past, at once too sweet
 to forget and too painful to recall,
 held her in a trance sometimes. 355

But oh these vivid flash-backs to Lanka . . .
 the sheltering Simsupa,
 the marvels of the envoy Hanuman,
 the truth-seeing Trijata! 356

There came an evening when Sita, sitting
 in her harbour alone, felt
 the approach of friendly understanding
 steps, and altered herself. 357

It was Vasu, with another trailing
 behind, who fell in a mass
 before Sita and cried: "Mother, Mother,
 is this how I should see you!" 358

Trijata! the clairvoyant Trijata!
 With far more self-possession
 than she had credited herself. Sita
 raised her as she lay prostrate, 359

and tears forcing tears, she found words to say:
 "I've been luxuriating—
 and squirming—by recollecting my life
 in Lanka's Asoka Grove. 360

I wished I could see you, and Anala,
 and your mother, Sarama;
 how's Vibhishana's governance? and has
 he healed the wounds of the past? 361

And Mandodari and Sulochana,
 those tragically bereaved
 exemplars of the holy feminine:
 I hope they're looked after well." 362

Vasu observed the scene of reunion
 with a sense of involvement,
 and intervened to say that the Dame had
 seen the Muni already. 363

It had to be cross-talk most of the time,
 for the questions multiplied;
 and there were often no ready answers,
 and silences ruled the roost. 364

Later, Trijata explained: "In Lanka,
 news from Ayodhya was scarce,
 but I was content to see you always
 as at the Coronation. 365

But presently I saw darkening clouds,
 the scene lost its clarity,
 and suddenly I could see you no more,
 and dimness covered the rest. 366

O Maithili, I worried my Father
 for news but to no purpose,
 and I was left more and more to my dreams
 and terrifying nightmares. 367

Night after night the same scenario:
 the false-tongued ogress, Rumour,
 leaping madly with hell-wide gaping mouth
 at angel innocence, You! 368

I was in a stupor for months on end,
 but there was a change at last:
 gone the glamour of Ayodhya, gone too
 the ravenous Rakshasi! 369

The dark withdrew, a mellow beauty dawned,
 I saw you as in Lanka
 yet now bathed in ochre serenity
 and glory of motherhood. 370

This new vision became a settled thing,
 and I knew I must join you;
 so after a brief stop at Ayodhya
 I have found my way to you. 371

This was surely love beyond reckoning,
 and with Valmiki's consent
 Trijata stayed on in the Ashrama
 and merged in its ambience. 372

And of course Maithili was the goddess
 of her private religion,
 and Trijata found joy in observing
 the fond mother and her twins. 373

They were indeed growing up, putting forth
 creepers of New Consciousness
 embracing the whole spectrum of human
 ardour and aspiration. 374

For Sita, 'twas no great matter for tears
 that the boys knew not as yet
 about their likely future destiny
 as heirs of the Raghu House. 375

Hadn't Rama received his education
 from Vasishta, and later,
 Visvamitra? And here was Valmiki
 taking full charge of the twins. 376

Now and then the boys would come to Sita
 with excitement, descending
 from the high Himalayas of Knowledge
 having attained some more peaks. 377

"Could Rama see them, how proud would he be!"
 She might let this passing thought
 graze her surface consciousness, but no more—
 'twas better the way it was! 378

Canto 71: Calm of Mind and Nightmare Visions

After the first few years in Valmiki's
spacious peace-girt hermitage,
Sita's condition settled to a calm
of mind, all dissonance spent. 379

The boys were growing in the robust air
of the forest, Prakriti
herself lending a hand in their progress;
and Sita knew contentment. 380

Sometimes she would wander all by herself
in the Ashrama circuit
marking the triumphs of co-existence
in envioning Nature. 381

A gaunt tree rising midst a rocky range,
bird-nests hid in its branches,
lusty ku-ku-s in chorus, and creepers
threading their nets everywhere: 382

an unending line of termites winding,
wandering, disappearing,
the centipedes on their unruffled tours,
and the squirrels frolicking: 383

flawed lifeless clay yet fostering new life
in the rooted plants, their buds
attracting the bright light-winged butterflies,
and Sita absorbing all! 384

This uncanny power of consciousness —
what saw, heard, touched, smelt, tasted,
what recorded, sifted, stored, or retrieved
at once for a re-cycling: 385

a million columns of pointer-readings
stored in the body's cells;
and like the countless galaxies above,
these universes within! 386

Was it only this life's experience
that secured recordation
in her memory's multi-million vaults —
or all the world's history? 387

She recalled Devi Mānasi's whisper
 that the interior self
 carried the whole memory of the race,
 all the past, present, future! 388

But only the saint, perhaps, could retrieve
 the needed bit of knowledge
 from the stacks of memory, for ready
 use or illumination. 389

And oft Sita observed the Ashrama
 inmates at work or prayer —
 yes, here a happy hermitress among
 a herd of cows and their calves; 390

there an elderly anchorite walking
 as if wholly abstracted
 and gently muttering a Vedic hymn
 with its haunting cadences; 391

plant, creeper, tree, and the smallest insects
 sporting a vivacious life;
 the ensemble of inanimate Earth
 whirling their diurnal round; 392

and under the spreading banyan seated,
 an ecstatic exuding
 his equation with the infinitudes
 of omnipresent Brahman! 393

The dull tally of uniformity,
 the lifeless routine gesture,
 and the feel of compulsive drudgery
 were alien to those spaces. 394

Hard labour in league with the mind and heart
 became the perfect prayer
 of the body's well-attuned commonwealth
 to the ordaining Powers. 395

No two leaves of the same stem of the same
 'branch of the same tree, no two
 petals of the same bud from the same bush
 will countenance mimicry. 396

Everything was different in that world
 of spendthrift munificence,
 but all that improvisation was geared
 to a unifying Law, 397

for beneath the stupendous variety
 the divine all-seeing Eyé
 held sovereignty, and ordained the mystique
 of terrestrial existence. 398

Oft she saw a tall bearded old hermit
 moving among the clusters
 of trees, vanishing into the arbours
 and emerging soon after; 399

he would look at the branches, nod his head,
 or bend to pick up something
 from the ground with its lavish colouring,
 and stuff it in his basket. 400

Or he would stop at the foot of a tree,
 turn his intent gaze above,
 and sustain a speechless conversation
 with a diminutive bird. 401

On the occasions the hermit's path crossed
 Maithili's, his liquid eyes
 of compassion seemed to speak more than speech,
 and she felt the brush of Grace. 402

Once only he stopped as though he would speak,
 and when she made obeisance
 he gestured his benediction, and spoke
 as if from the depths profound: 403

"There's Providence, O Earth-born Maithili,
 in every quirk or upset
 of circumstance, as in every cloudburst
 or sunrise of good fortune. 404

I watch with unflagging fascination
 the ceaseless flux of earth-life,
 the countless species so diversified
 yet enacting concordance. 405

Errant as the human species may be,
 the greater life must emerge
 out of the wreckage of these organic
 filaments heaped all over. 406

Not in vain Vaidehi, O not in vain
 have you come out of the earth
 by sanction of Madhavi, but only
 for hastening the Greater Dawn." 407

He walked on, as though he could say no more,
nor wanted to face Sita
as she tuned her poignancy into sounds
and verbal formulations. 408

She watched the retreating and vanishing
figure of Rishi Mouni,
and as his voice was lost in its echoes,
a great peace settled in her. 409

Henceforth in her sessions of silent thought,
with her progressive success
in sustaining her inner calm, she won
her way to a great insight. 410

The striking short-term causal sequences
lost much of their bite and sting,
and seemed but segments of a larger scheme
powered from a distant source. 411

Dasaratha's softness for Kaikeyi,
her own stimulated spurt
of ambition; Rama's concern for Truth,
Sita's adhesion to him: 412

aye, her fateful lapse at Panchavati,
the pitiless iron chain
of consequences, all the sordid shame
and dolour in Asoka: 413

the monumental clash of arms, the end
of the Rakshasa's misrule,
the fire ordeal, the brief happiness,
and the second rejection: 414

and Kakutstha, shackled by the idlers'
fantasies, had opted for
the illusion of kingship, rather than
the claims of Life, Love and Truth! 415

What was the logic behind this sequence—
this strange network —of events,
unless all were indeed the divers notes
of an unconcluded Song? 416

Rama had caused no greater injury
to her life and her psyche
than to himself, his name, setting at naught
his concern for his own good. 417

And she wondered, half-smiling to herself,
 whether for one like Rama
 or herself, the 'good' was isolable
 from the good of all the rest. 418

From what obscurely distant powerhouse
 was the Arbiter of All,
 the supreme Master of Ceremonies,
 directing this orchestra? 419

It was now Maithili's crystallised view
 that there was room no longer
 for grievances and recriminations,
 regrets and complacencies. 420

Why was Rama's unique life-history
 soldered so purposefully
 with the strange destinies of Ahalya,
 Kabanda and Sabari? 421

And how enriched she was, thought Maithili,
 when her self-exile led her
 to Anasuya and Lopamudra,
 Trijata and Hanuman. 422

No, no, she told herself, no excuse now
 to dwell on one's own setbacks;
 the jutting rocks were submerged in the sea,
 the arcs in the full circle. 423

And so day followed day, and the seasons
 acted their cyclical rounds;
 and another year began, and her boys
 grew up as a noble pair. 424

She kept no count of time, for the rhythm
 of life in the Ashrama
 carried her along, making her a part
 of the Law of Becoming, 425

and every dawn was a glorious birth,
 and the awakening gods
 daily greeter, the unsmiling Sita
 with a call to joy in life. 426

It was a mystic evening calm and free
 prefiguring, one might think,
 an endless series of celestial dawns,
 a new earth and new heaven. 427

And excited Kusa and Lava burst
into Maithili's arbour
and shouted together: "Mother, Mother,
a Vanara to see you!" 428

Before she could overcome her surprise,
there was Maruti himself,
the gold-faced Mahatma, and the same rare
paraclete beyond compare. 429

Hanuman made deep obeisance at once,
as though 'twas far too poignant
to face Maithili in her ochre weeds
and ascetic radiance. 430

She was speechless for an eternity,
her eyes resisting the rain
of tears with an effort of will; and she
felt petrified in that stance. 431

"Rise, Hanuman!" Maithili said at last,
"you are the choicest medicine,
the infallible reviving nectar,
for my muted existence." 432

The Wind-God's son managed to rise, as if
still reluctant to face her,
and in the poise of immobility
stared long at her lotus feet. 433

The paragon of appropriate speech
that could fuse light with delight
now felt tongue-tied still, and thought that silence
best conveyed his agony. 434

What was there to say? He had seen Rama
earlier at Ayodhya,
and had found that sun-splendoured countenance
shadowed by the settled clouds. 435

He had accepted his own tragedy.
the benumbing weariness
of the dragging days, months, years that but stressed
the loneliness of his life. 436

Maruti had also seen the Grace-Light
on Sita's golden image
in the regal Court Hall in Ayodhya—
a silent accusation! 437

Alas, thought Anjaneya deep within,
 sovereignty and sorow there,
 and glory of grace and grief here: was this
 the truth of avatarhood? 438

Where was the need, he wondered, to spell out
 the intricate semantics
 of the need for defeat and suffering
 in the chosen of the race? 439

As Kusa and Lava witnessed the scene,
 by a leap of intuition
 they knew the Vanara for a Power
 potent and pre-eminent, 440

and thought it fit to withdraw noiselessly
 from the intolerably
 tense scene, leaving it to them to exchange
 speech freely if they desired. 441

"Devi!" said Maruti with an effort,
 "the existential riddle!
 Who can unriddle it, O Maithili,
 when all is mere bafflement! 442

Oh the splendour of the Coronation,
 the great burst of rejoicing,
 the confluence of all the pure waters,
 the chorus of thanksgiving! 443

How could all peter out into nothing,
 the taunting lack-lustre there,
 the tranquil obscurity here! a feat
 of cruel self-division! 444

But I've seen this lively luminous pair,
 and I can imagine how
 Rama won the hearts of all as a boy
 with Saumitri by his side. 445

I've seen too the compassionate Muni
 who sits God-like in his calm
 of comprehension of an alien world
 and its shrouded verities. 446

Here among the elected silences
 and sacrificial spaces,
 with the high priests of askesis, knowledge,
 wisdom keyed to the future, 447

the boys seem to thrive in an atmosphere
 charged with power and purpose
 and flashing the Spirit's light, befitting
 the pioneers of the Dawn. 448

Mother Sita, there's nothing more to say,
 for all language falsifies
 by conveying more or less than is meant,
 while silence speaks to the depths. 449

'Twas Queen Tara who had intimations
 through her recurring nightmares
 of the summary second rejection
 and callous abandonment. 450

I had at last to come and see, — and now
 I can set her mind at ease;
 may the Divine Lila work itself out, —
 and once more, my obeisance." 451

Sita smiled through the rainbow of her tears
 and said: "Go in peace, my son:
 be it Lila or but Yoga Maya,
 the divine play must go on!" 452

The slow passage of the years, ten or more,
 had made for a mellowing
 of Maithili's manifold agony,
 and she was Mother to all. 453

She charged the winding walks and wide spaces
 of Valmiki's hermitage
 with the grace of her Grace and the aura
 of her hard-won poise and peace. 454

And she would gaze with a rapt attention
 at the green and smiling Earth,
 all the riot of colour, change, movement
 on the Mother's countenance. 455

Was her almost constant smile but a mask,
 a veil to hide her growing
 resentment against the perversity
 of her thoughtless progeny? 456

She might frown of a sudden, and the sky
 would be rent in two, cyclones
 cry disaster, and the unexpected
 ordain orgies of excess. 457

The humans panicked, gave what names they liked:
 flood and fury, erupting
 lava from the bowels, the abnormal'
 in its brief ascendancy. 458

But Sita was apt to wonder whether
 'twas not the Mother frowning
 or Kali in her frenzy or Shiva
 dancing the Doom of the Worlds! 459

Sita reviewed the course of human growth
 in outer and inner life:
 the adventure of civilisation,
 the flowering of culture. 460

But the excrescences as in Lanka,
 the pomp and extravagance,
 the scratching and scraping of the fair earth,
 the dig into the bowels: 461

the deprivation of the earth's marrow
 of its key constituents,
 the plunder of the husbanded riches,
 and the draining of the blood: 462

the interference with the bone-structure,
 the whole build of the beauty
 of the body of the patient Mother:
 no end to the sacrilege! 463

Monstrous apparitions had arisen,
 and more hideous ones would rise;
 barren murderous metal would usurp
 the spaces of living green, 464

and presumptuous unholy towers
 might invade the upper air
 and serve as petty hide-outs for the swarm
 of degraded human ants! 465

Sita could almost hear the Mother moan:
 'These witless ones, these restless
 improvident children, are destroying
 my terrestrial balance. 466

I've bequeathed to them easy conditions
 of living and surviving
 as a race leading millions of others
 and essaying harmony. 467

There's this transparant envelope around,
 the sweet air of sustenance
 as though wafted from the effect regions
 of a distant paradise. 468

There's the munificence of fresh water
 cycled inexorably
 by evaporation from the oceans
 followed by cloud-burst and rain. 469

A day may come when the titanic Man
 in defiance of the Gods
 and ignorance of his own future
 scuttles the base plank itself. 470

With a mixture of presumption and pride,
 Rakshasa and Asura —
 albeit inhabiting the human frame --
 will desecrate everything, 471

and the fertile and magnificent earth,
 dug up and filled with noxious
 effluents and wastes, will become at last
 one dismal sterility 472

The ineffable nexus that's closer
 than the dancer and the dance,
 the wordless sound and its symbol meaning,
 new birth and the baby's cry, 473

the elemental cohesive power
 of the atom universe
 the ultimate blood-code of the cosmos —
 has held its secret thus far. 474

Would Man one day, drunk with Asuric milk
 and weighted with Rakshasa
 armour and overweening ambition,
 dare the final sacrilege? 475

Ah set up the witches' cauldron and brew
 the critical concoction
 that will fission the atom and invoke
 the Shatterer of the Worlds? 476

Tear apart the filmy life-protector,
 charge and change and carbonise,
 infect the elements with lethal fumes,
 and decree the end of life? 477

Man was dowered with freedom, thought Sita,
to be wise or otherwise,
to swear by Good or Evil, love or hate,
joy or sorrow, life or death. 478

But if all Man's stumblings, strivings, climbings
must light up his way only
to a final leap into the Abyss—
oh Grace will act even then! 479

The passion and the prophecy were spent,
and she felt a shudder pass
through the obscurest cells of her body,
and she was like one reborn. 480

What was it—fancy, vision, dream, nightmare—
that had held her in a thrall
of such sharp excruciating anxiety,
and had left her exhausted? 481

As Sita cast her eager eyes around,
the familiar fair vistas
of Valmiki's Ashrama greeted her
with love, and she felt refreshed. 482

Having raised her eyes and hands in worship
of the Rising Sun, Sita
intoned the sounds of the great Gayatri,
and went back to her cottage. 483

Canto 72: 'The Song of Rama'

It was a bright forenoon, and Bhargava,
as was his custom, offered
obeisance to Sita in her harbour
and spoke with animation: 484

"Ah Mother, during our walk this morning—
I'm excited about it!—
we saw Narada winging and singing
his way to our Ashrama. 485

Moody for weeks past, the Muni welcomed
the Sage and pointedly asked:
'Tell me, O great Wanderer of the Worlds,
for nothing can escape you, 486

tell me who in all this world is truly
wise, righteous, exemplary:
firm in *tapasya*, conscientious, tranquil
and given to gratitude; 487

who's he that's the best of monarchs, learned
and wise at once, valiant,
the ensemble of all excellences,
and the chosen of Lakshmi?' 488

'Seldom, O Muni,' answered Narada,
'all the virtues co-exist,
yet Kakutsthan Rama of Ayodhya
embodies them all with ease. 489

A friend to all living creatures, adept
in Dharma, schooled in knowledge,
charismatic, master of arts and science,
and seeped in the seer-wisdoms; 490

Kausalya's darling son and source of joy,
majestic like Himavar †,
in his anger like cataclysmal fire
yet spraying love all around. 491

A harmony of diverse auspicious
distinctions and qualities,
Rama incarnates high integrity
and beneficence to all.' 492

And with several other encomiums
 the Rishi briefly recalled
 the main events of Rama's history, †
 nothing extenuated, 493

nor aught irrelevant brought in — the whole
 heroic life-history:
 the crookback, the twin demands, the exile;
 the war, peace and reunion, 494

all leapt to the luminiscence of life
 in the sage-singer's vibrant
 voice, so melodious and all-sufficing:
 and the Muni grew pensive. 495

When Narada left, the Muni approached
 Tamasa's limpid waters,
 wondered if they weren't like the consciousness
 of pure men with realised souls, 496

and while self-communing after his bath,
 saw the felling of a bird
 while it was in love-play, and deeply moved,
 broke out into rhythmic speech: 497

'O vile huntsman-killer of this Krauncha
 just in his moment of joy,
 ah how may you hope in all this wide world
 for a place of restful ease!' 498

The Muni thought it strange that his pity
 could achieve such rhythmic speech
 in four slow spans, the 'sloka' imaging
 his own spontaneous 'soka'. 499

When we had returned to the Ashrama, —
 the Muni still deep in thought! —
 the Primogenitor came and saw through
 everything, and sagely said: 500

'That verse, Muni, was no freak but the will
 and Voice of Poesy Divine;
 sparked with incandescence, 'twill bear the weight
 of the tale Narada sang. 501

Guided by my Grace, O Kavi, you'll see
 everything known and unknown,
 concerning Rama, Ravana's end, and
 Sita's gloried history.' 502

And Brahma left with the benediction:

‘As long as mountains stand, and
rivers flow, O Muni, this song sublime
will live in men’s memories.’ 503

The Sage has now retired lost in wonder,
and is savouring the great
theme and its resonances in his soul
in a mood of ecstasy. 504

O Mother, on this day like no other,
our Muni, having received
the clue from Narada and the command
from Brahma, will tell your Tale. 505

He’s poised in the creative Yogic stance,
and methinks I see him still,
self-absorbed in the trance of creation,
seeing, saying and thanking!” 506

Sita said nothing, for her eyes betrayed
that there was a siege within
of contrary emotions, fear and joy,
and the feel of tears in things. 507

Meanwhile the Muni, centered in Dharma
and poised in thought, saw at once
the interlinked destinies of Lanka,
Kishkindha and Kosala, 508

and in a dive into the depths of his
Yogic meditation, he
viewed the story with its concord of parts,
like a berry on his palm. 509

He marked the veins and the arching contours,
the body beautiful but
almost bursting at the seams, and he could
see the living Tale, its soul. 510

And with Maithili in her misery
crowned in his still agonised
heart of compassion, he read it chiefly
as Sita’s saga sublime. 511

While the story in its full amplitude
lay stretched across his vision,
the Muni resolved he would begin
where his heart had found its voice. 512

The killing of the Krauncha, the wild cries
 of the surviving female,
 had set the aged Muni's heart ablaze
 and touched the profoundest springs. 513

Day after day and for over ten years
 on end, the Muni had seen
 the stricken deer in Sita's countenance:
 the paradigm of sadness! 514

He would begin, then, with brave Hanuman's
 flight to Lanka, his meeting
 with Sita under the Simsupa tree,
 and the shock to Ravana. 515

Let this Book of Sita — the seed and heart
 of the whole — be completed,
 the Muni thought; and the rest of the Tale
 would be more like scaffolding! 516

Late in the afternoon next day, Kusa
 and Lava burst into her
 presence with the exhilarating news
 of the Muni's dictation 517

of the tale of Vanara Hanuman
 leaping across the ocean
 and landing on Rakshasa Ravana's
 opulent city, Lanka. 518

"As the Muni indites," explained Kusa,
 "we both write down the verses,
 and he has asked us to memorise them
 for sing-song recitation." 519

Off and on, in subsequent weeks and months,
 the boys would take their mother
 into their confidence, and share with her
 their continued excitement. 520

While Valmiki's unfailing afflatus
 flowed into the divers moulds
 of the epic characters in action,
 the scribes too felt quite involved. 521

And when even the fall-out of their zeal
 touched Maithili to the quick,
 she withdrew within to her shrouded self,
 and introspection followed. 522

Their antecedents, the identity
of their Mother, their likely
future prospects of Empire were closely
guarded Ashrama secrets. 523

Kusa and Lava readily assumed
that they too were of the woods,
and were content to dissolve their egos
in the common simple life. 524

As she heard snatches of the heroic
poem from the ringing lips
Of her animated sons, she didn't know
whether 'twas hell or heaven. 525

Had she not once told Hanuman, when he
described Rama's condition,
that she found it nectar mixed with poison?
Again the same joy and pain! 526

And the days passed with the remorselessness
of a predestination
that humans seemed unable to alter,
or even to understand. 527

Already it was almost twelve years since
Valmiki had received her
when she stood forlorn near his Ashrama
not far from the riverside, 528

and the slow and weary passage of time
had witnessed the blossoming
of the childhood, boyhood and incipient
youth of Kusa and Lava! 529

The epic, with all its vicissitudes,
now reached its logical end,
the great Coronation at Ayodhya,
and the boys could sing it all. 530

And then it came to pass that Satrugna
halted in the Ashrama
on his way back to Ayodhya, and heard
the twins sing the Rama Song. 531

Greatly moved, after obeisance he told
Sita that after long years
he was going to Ayodhya at last,
and would soon meet Raghava. 532

The twins were shaping splendidly, he said,
 the image of the Raghus;
 and he had the certain premonition
 they would soon come to their own. 533

He had no special news from Ayodhya,
 so he presumed all was well;
 and 'twas likely Rama might soon perform
 the prescribed Horse Sacrifice. 534

Meant for purification, rather than
 mere self-glorification,
 this Asvamedha Yaga might unleash
 the hoped-for efflorescence. 535

Janaki wished him godspeed, sent wordless
 good wishes to her sisters,
 and a gesture of obeisance to all,
 mothers and elders alike. 536

Canto 73: In the Soul's Mystic Cave

The whole day Sita was dimly aware
of rumblings and murmurings
in the dim regions of the unconscious
in the obscure hinterland. 537

But the hurly burly of common day, --
the unceasing glare and whirl, --
smothered the intended intimations
till evening passed into night. 538

Now in the quiet and serenity
of the small hours, Maithili
sat alone, as she had grown accustomed,
with a full view of the sky. 539

Stilled were the echoes and emanations
from the subterranean realms,
and oppressive almost was the pressure
of union of silences. 540

In the sacred hush of that pregnant time,
Sita felt she was installed
at the core of things, and could almost hear
the faint beating of her heart. 541

'Twas as though the scales fell, the mystic cave
opened, and she could see through
the dense-packed clouds of phenomenal life
and sight the splendorous Sun. 542

Sita felt instantly lighter, she thought
the weary weight of the past
had slipped and rolled away, she deemed herself
free, ineluctably free. 543

Was she awake, or dreaming, she wondered;
or a trance, perhaps; she grew
conscious she was the Earth, which in its turn
was the cosmos in essence. 544

"While a few million star-clusters," she mused,
"look down from the firmament
on this fair green insignificant earth,
here is the key to them all. 545

All categories of near and distant,
 and small and huge, tend to melt
 and disappear in the ancient Agni
 or the ultimate Real. 546

What's this paradox of paradoxes?
 I see this mere grain of sand
 somehow holding within its secure clasp
 the infinite universe. 547

An atom, a grain of sand, is nothing,
 yet comprehends everything;
 in a child's eye, its ocean-depths, I glimpse
 the immensities without!" 548

The crystal clarity of the moment
 seemed conducive to psychic
 visions, and Sita saw physical Earth
 as herself, and Mother too! 549

It was, then, something more than bazar-talk
 or mystery-mongering;
 no stale metaphor this, no cover-up
 story, or fanciful myth. 550

Perhaps Prakriti, eternal Mother,
 forever experiments
 with New Life, and her children oft aspire
 to reach the beckoning heights. 551

Ah here, in this world of the lesser breeds,
 the animal law prevails;
 or at best, leaving the beast behind, Man
 looks up to the higher Light. 552

And there, there, in the other world of dreams,
 the realms of the Ideal,
 the Patriarch of the Order bends down,
 ready to extend his Grace. 553

Hadn't she occurred age after age, always
 as the Earth-born mystery
 enacting endurance for the world's sake
 and trying to bridge the gap? 554

Looking backward at Time's vanishing tracks
 and forward to the Future,
 she thought she saw herself at the centre
 of the Manifestation: 555

at once a Ray of the infinite Grace
unseverable from it,
and an atom of the recumbent Earth
awaiting the retrieval. 556

The compulsive immaculate silence
gave the beauty of repose
to the arbour and the Ashrama grounds
merging in the woodland main. 557

A moment of startling percipience,
and she saw the oddity
of her being the centre as well as
the circumference of all! 558

Didn't she comprise, as the human Sita,
the great hierarchy entire
from the resistant material base
to the spiritual top? 559

At the starkly physical, Ravana
had made a fiendish assault
and lugged her along to distant Lanka,
as though she were a carcass! 560

Wasn't the physical pain of that outrage
transmitted the world over,
to every crack and corner and crevice
of Prakriti's dominion? 561

If what happened to the outer being
meant such general sharing,
the more poignant subjective agony
coursed like poison through the veins. 562

But while the sheer instantaneous sharing
was an existential fact,
this didn't surge up as fierce consciousness-force
to hold back the Rakshasa. 563

Why did she lack the power, Sita asked
herself, to make effective
her resistance, although she was the hub,
the heart of the world's body? 564

"Even the soul's sovereignty," thought Sita,
"isn't enough, if it cannot
impose its will on the mind, senses and
the material body. 565

My flame-pure heart and invincible soul
 didn't save me from Ravana's
 loathsome and lecherous touch, nor spare me
 from the scandal-mongers' spite. 566

That I had kept my inner continents
 free from any infection
 didn't alter the fact of my abduction
 or the later rejection. 567

From the grossest material granite—
 the seat of the Inconscience—
 to the dizziest summits where sits crowned
 the glassy supreme Essence: 568

this sweep of consciousness from the nadir
 of a fathomless Zero
 to the infinity of the zenith
 and its Power and Glory: 569

all this in the atomic universe
 of a flawed human being,
 as also in the inter-locked world-stair
 from the Dark Pit to the Sun! 570

Unless Manifestation can achieve
 a total, an integral
 transformation or divinisation
 from Here to Eternity: 571

from the body's cells to the Spirit's heights,
 from the germ or worm to God,
 sundry intermediate interventions
 can only be palliatives. 572

Since its beginnings, terrestrial life
 seems to have uneasily
 exercised contrary pulls and see-sawed
 between the extremities. 573

In the early dawn and sunny morning
 of my life in Mithila,
 everything about me seemed apparelled
 in flawless beauty and joy. 574

'Twas the meeting with Ahalya gave me
 a sharp hint of the evil
 that lies in wait to trap the unwary
 and cast them on the dung-heap. 575

This reinforced the vague apprehensions
 bred by my dreams and nightmares,
 and although bliss was it when Rama came,
 the uneasiness remained. 576

As I grew older, I was the sadder
 wiser one,—and woe is me,
 I shackled myself by my own folly
 and landed in Asoka. 577

Yet I found then, and later, and always,
 that just when all seemed darkest,
 sudden Light poured, thereby transfiguring
 and redeeming everything. 578

This has given me a synoptic view
 of the sure proximity
 of opposites, and it's more a matter
 of making the proper moves. 579

In the present condition of cosmic
 uncertainty, the endless
 run of vicissitudes makes it appear
 life's truly a valley of tears. 580

There was so much ado before Rama
 could end Ravana's misrule;
 now Satrugna, having killed Lavana,
 will return to Ayodhya. 581

But when, O when is our Earth to be made
 safe for the pure and the sane?
 When will the children of dear Mother Earth
 deserve her largesse and love? 582

My life of manifestation has been
 a limited ministry
 highlighting the wisdom of sufferance
 and the certainty of Grace. 583

Rama has shown he can destroy evil
 in the form of Ravana
 and his titan hordes, and re-establish
 the meek and the peace-loving. 584

But the world isn't still rid of all evil,
 for even like Ravana's
 heads, for one cut down, another springs up,
 and chaos is back again. 585

The world of evil, the sons of Darkness,
 aren't to be merely put down,
 but by a new power of alchemy
 need to be wholly transformed. 586

And not until that ultimate battle
 is definitively won
 can the drama of Manifestation
 be wound up as obsolete. 587

Satrughna spoke of an Asvamedha
 Sacrifice that Rama might
 perform, and this could mean a momentous
 reordering of affairs. 588

But for myself, I'm drained of fear and hope;
 I feel prematurely old
 fallen into the sear, the yellowed leaf,
 and I've no illusions left. 589

Can I hope that this Asvamedha will
 accomplish the last breakthrough,
 smash the veil between Inconscience and Light
 and throw open the New Life? 590

Or perhaps, the crucial final battle
 will be waged another time,
 other actors will play their assigned roles
 and structure the Next Future. 591

And we may come down again, leaving our
 far Home in the Transcendent,
 and then at least render whole and wholesome
 this errant unfinished world!" 592

The wish was a hope, was a prayer, and
 a benediction as well;
 Sita felt a great peace descend on her,
 and the peace merged with the place. 593

Canto 74: Asvamedha and the Twin Rhapsodists

When he thought the time was ripe, the righteous Raghava, Ayodhya's King, held counsel with Vasishtha, Kasyapa, Vamadeva, Jabali,	594
as also his brothers and advisers, and they resolved with one mind upon a Yāga on Gomati's banks in the Naimisa forest.	595
Lakshmana was then directed at once to inform allies and friends near and far, and invite them to attend the forthcoming Sacrifice:	596
King Sugriva, and his Vanara hosts; equally Vibhishana, and the Rakshasa stalwarts; and other Kings, Princes, Munis, Rishis.	597
They were invited with their kith and kin to witness the Sacrifice and take part in the high festivities and ritual sequences.	598
The famed Eminences, the Mahatmas, the exemplars of Dharma, and the haloed seasoned ones were among the prized and prominent guests.	599
Then came the time of inauguration, which involved the exodus of a population with its effects to the place of Sacrifice.	600
While Lakshmana and the selected Priests accompanied the Black Horse as it freely sauntered forth sporting all the characteristic marks,	601
'twas Bharata's responsibility with Satrughna's assistance to make the necessary arrangements in the Naimisa woodlands.	602

Men, materials and cash had to be
 conveyed to the chosen spot;
 the Pavilion, and the ancillary
 guest-houses and cottages 603

for the stay of the invited Rishis,
 Kings, Princes, royal ladies,
 and the many serviteurs: the dwellings
 had all to come up in time. 604

“And Bharata,” said Rama, “take with you
 our mothers, royal sisters,
 and Sita’s golden Image too to share
 my sacrificial sanctum.” 605

Now the black majestic Horse was abroad,
 the Brothers had their duties
 assigned, and Kakutstha himself headed
 his forces to Naimisa. 606

The contingents of guests from Kishkindha
 and Lanka had already
 arrived, and they took the lead in serving
 the newly assembling guests. 607

Then followed months of feasting at the spot
 chosen for the Sacrifice,
 and a populous Mandala arose
 in the heart of Naimisa. 608

Muni Valmiki too, like the other
 invited Maharishis,
 reached the Naimisa settlement, taking
 all his disciples with him. 609

They had their own cluster of cottages
 not far from the Yāga Hall,
 and Maithili had also come, brooding
 like a lone witness spirit. 610

She recalled her crossing this fair region
 with Rama and Saumitri
 twenty-six years ago, when Sumantra
 had driven the chariot. 611

It had seemed a marvellous adventure,
 although they had in fact lost
 their all — kingdom, comfort, security,
 and their relations and friends; 612

but in the rainbowed morning of their lives,
the risks and uncertainties
themselves, and even the deprivations,
had put on romantic hues. 613

The rivers -- Tamasa, Vedasruti,
Gomati -- and the forest,
Naimiṣa, had filled Sita with wonder,
and prayers had sprung from her. 614

What a stretch of native magnificence,
all Ayodhya, Kosala,
and the nearer rivers like Sarayu,
and the more distant Ganga! 615

And oh she remembered too the second
journeying twelve years ago,
Saumitri escorting her, Sumantra
in the driver's seat again. 616

She had felt invaded by nameless fears
when she saw inauspicious
omens on the way, and Saumitri had
seemed unaccountably sad. 617

They had found ready shelter for the night
in one of the Ashramas
on Gomati's banks, and a hermitress
had taken charge of Sita. 618

That was an appalling night, Maithili
remembered; the future cast
its shadow ahead, but that saintly Dame
had chased all spectres away. 619

As for the thunderclap of the next day,
the death-mask on Saumitri's
face -- no, all was past, not worth recalling;
only the Muni remained! 620

And now Sita was here again, grown dry,
her life left largely behind;
but Mother Earth smiled the same as ever,
and here was the bliss of peace. 621

Day followed day, and the sanctified earth
wore a sprightly look, and Kings,
commoners, minstrels, priests, entertainers
gave life to the Mandala. 622

When at last the Asvamedha Yāga
 got off to a proper start,
 the world's most renowned Rishis were all there
 and raised a chrous of chants. 623

A day after, Muni Valmiki called
 Kusa and Lava, and said:
 "The Song of Rama that you've learnt from me
 now merits recital here. 624

You should make your own rounds of the many
 clusters of new cottages
 and sing of Rama, of Sita's sorrows,
 and the end of Ravana. 625

The greatness and innate moral beauty
 of the theme, and your voices
 in perfect unison with the Veena,
 must ravish all listeners. 626

You should preserve the native musical
 quality of your voices
 by subsisting on healthy fruits and roots,
 and avoiding all excess. 627

Should the King himself — the great Kakutstha —
 come to know of your talents
 and ask you to sing before the gathered
 Rishis, ascetics, princes, 628

you might accede to the royal request,
 and recite the whole epic,
 singing for three or four weeks at the rate
 of twenty cantos a day. 629

But remember, my children, all money
 is mere dross to anchorites;
 we're content with the simple life, and fruits
 and roots; of what use is gold? 630

Should Kakutstha make any inquiries
 about your antecedents,
 say simply that you are the disciples
 of the Rishi, Valmiki." 631

The Muni's well-chosen words were received
 by the ardent minstrel twins
 in their souls' deeper listening, and they felt
 quite buoyed up for the great task. 632

Over a period of months, playing
 faithful amanuenses
 while the Muni's creative frenzy flowed
 in a stream of poesy, 633

the twins had learned to merge with the noble
 heroic Tale enacting
 the victory of Truth and Holiness,
 and the collapse of Evil. 634

Sita, Rama, Lakshmana, Bharata,
 Hanuman were verily
 like the coursing ruddy drops in their blood,
 and the boys had lived those roles. 635

No wonder their emotive recitals
 seemed like the evocation
 of the past, all the pity and terror,
 all the glory and the good. 636

Rama too heard a recital by chance
 and, overpowered by it,
 made inquiries about the authorship
 of the narrative in verse. 637

"Muni Valmiki," they said, "indited
 this Tale, and we took it down;
 it tells your heroic life, O great King,
 in five hundred sequences. 638

Our preceptor-sage has taught us the art
 of musical recitals;
 and, if you wish, we'll sing by instalments
 when the day's rites are over." 639

And so on successive evenings the guests
 gathered in the Pavilion
 and the magic of the twin minstrels' song
 captivated the hearers. 640

And still they gazed as they heard, and their joy
 and wonder grew, for they saw
 Rama, Sita's gold Image, and the twins,
 and noted the resemblance. 641

Truly with their matted locks and hermit
 weeds and angelic faces,
 Kusa and Lava shone as replicas
 of Rama and Lakshmana, 642

not the King and his Brother they now saw,
 but the darling Princes twain
 of almost thirty years ago, when they
 left for the woods with Sita. 643

The elderly in the congregation
 whispered: "The very image
 of the heroic pair, and there's the touch
 of the gracious Sita too!" 644

As day succeeded day, the epic climb
 escalated to great heights;
 and there were rumours, anxious whisperings,
 and speculation was rife. 645

And all the time, in the sanctuary
 of her little hut, Sita
 chased intruding thoughts away, and communed
 with her soul's infinitudes. 646

But the daily evening recitations,
 the minstrels' magnetic voice,
 their charismatic countenance, all stirred
 memories of Maithili. 647

And among those that felt thus galvanised
 by the stir of memory
 were the Queen-Mothers, the visiting Queens,
 and the Mithilan sisters. 648

But while the bitter-sweet remembrances
 of Sita's star-crossed saga
 caused pain and pity, they also blunted
 the incentive to action. 649

The cruel definitive expulsion
 had occurred twelve years ago.
 and even Vasishta and Kausalya
 had learnt of it but later. 650

If any knew what had happened to her
 they had preferred not to speak,
 and people had been content to accept
 the surrogate gold Image. 651

The great Earth-born's life had become a Name,
 a memory, a symbol;
 none dared to talk about it to the King—
 calumny had won indeed! 652

And now, this polyphonic explosion
of Sita's saga sublime!
Evening after evening the epic climb
held the audience in thrall. 653

The daily progress of the Sacrifice
evoked much less attention
than the spiralling sorrows of Sita,
the incandescent Earth-born! 654

There were, besides, the strange subterranean
hopes and surmises bearing
upon the twins' tell-tale looks recalling
both Rama and Maithili. 655

But if Kusa and Lava were the heirs,
what had happened to Sita?
Was she in hiding somewhere? or had she
gone back to her Earth-Mother? 656

Rama himself, when on the first evening
he heard the early cantos,
had offered gold to the twin rhapsodists;
but they had declined the gift: 657

"O King, what shall we do with this largesse
of gold and silver and silk?
As Ashrama children, we live on fruits,
and roots, and shun possessions." 658

Presently he felt keyed up more and more
and was increasingly awed
by the poet's uncanny omniscience
and evocative power. 659

His face immobile, Rama seemed to be
beyond the dualities,
whether of fulfilment and frustration,
or righteousness and remorse. 660

And the recitals continued, taking
the massive congregation
from Ayodhya to Mithila and back,
and on to Janasthana. 661

While most hearers merely felt hypnotised
by the tense re-enactment
of the events of many years ago,
some few fought battles within. 662

And Srutakirti, shrewder than the rest,
inferred the ambrosial truth,
and had the needed corroboration ♪
from her dear lord, Satrugna. 663

So the wounded one was right in their midst,
and none knew about it! Ah,
nothing could now stop Srutakirti from
forcing her way to Sita! 664

Canto 75: Communion and Reunions

In the orange weeds of a hermitress
as she sat like solitude
aloof, impassive, immitigable,
Sita was her larger self. 665

The other inmates, and the Muni too,
had gone to the Pavilion
all eager to hear the rhapsodists sing
the Tale of the living King. 666

In the evening twilight of curled-up peace,
Sita sat self-communing
under a tree among the silences
of the woods of Naimisa. 667

Her relaxed expression gradually changed,
and a slow tension wound up,
and memory unleashed introspection,
almost an insurrection. 668

How should she sum up the misadventure
of her life that had spread o'er
forty or more years? A pitiful waste,
or a mystic fulfilment? 669

"Twelve months of misery in Asoka,"
she recalled; but by her own
sustained askesis, she had kept at bay
the hells within and without. 670

Then the brief season of the holiness
of wedded felicity
in Ayodhya's bright spaces, and among
the admired and admiring; 671

and now, the latest phase of twelve long years
in Valmiki's Ashrama,
and this had been a prolonged *tapasya*
under the Muni's aegis. 672

If he had been for her at once Father,
benefactor and Guru,
the other Rishis and hermitresses
had enfolded her with love. 673

Those wonderful Yogis and ascetics
 going the rounds of their tasks
 with an unhurried ease that eschewed all
 fever, fret and impatience! 674

She remembered the melting melodies
 of dear Nadopasini
 and the sudden blessing from old Mouni
 the peripatetic one. 675

How many mute unknown Arundhatis,
 Anasuyas, Ahalyas,
 Lopamudras; how many exemplars
 of the pure feminine gold! 676

They seemed neither obsessively to love
 their life, nor hate it; nor crave
 for joy, nor cry o'er the coming of pain —
 phantoms of transience both! 677

How different from the city women
 lost in the giddy pleasures
 of the senses—oh their tensions, tantrums,
 ailments, boudoirs, confidants! 678

Sita couldn't help thinking of Kaikeyi,
 her aristocratic airs,
 her lollings, loungings, and her fatal taste
 for the crookback's flatteries. 679

And how about those in the grim purlieus
 of Night where the Asuras
 of lust gorged upon themselves, snuffing out
 the life-giving Light within? 680

Then, at the spectrum's hither end, were those
 princesses of poverty,
 fed on faith and the milk of paradise
 and rendered nude and immune? 681

What was the secret of the silent strength
 and robust serenity
 of those angels and ministers of Grace
 who sanctified all they touched? 682

The elected Ashrama ambience,
 the rhythm of daily life,
 the deeper chastening by the Vedic chants,
 the seminal racial myths! 683

Slowly over a stretch of years, she had
 won her way to a burning
 clarity of perception that imbibed
 the notes of the Hymn of Peace. 684

She thought too of the Epic the Muni
 had completed, transforming
 the K'rauncha's grief into the moving spans
 of her own sad history. 685

And, after all, Sita ruminated,
 even Dandaka hadn't been
 maliciously or thoughtlessly cruel
 'like Kosala's vicious males. 686

But need Rama, who had infallible
 understanding, have given
 all that credence to such poisoned chatter
 as though 'twas scripture itself? 687

Or, had he felt his hands forced, why didn't he
 come away himself with her,
 installing Bharata or Lakshmana
 or Satrughna on the throne? 688

Sita now reminded herself sharply —
 as so many times before —
 how 'twas her immaturity that had
 purchased all that misery: 689

not only the blight in Asoka Grove,
 but the war in Lanka too,
 and the tears of bereaved mothers, widows,
 the aged and the orphaned. 690

"This will never do!" she chided herself,
 the mind in its turbulence
 could indulge in vagabond wastefulness,
 and razor-like cut both ways. 691

Nothing was gained by opening old wounds,
 ' or prodding or probing them;
 and 'twas foolish to surrender once more
 to the blinding*illusions: 692

"If joy with its excess cloyes and sickens
 the appetite, the starkness
 of misery grown familiar too long
 loses its rancour and sting. 693

Ah the mind, when it's sovereignly centered
 in the stillness of the soul,
 sees all and knows all, and is unafraid
 of Time's vagaries of play. 694

Rama rejected me at Lanka, then
 seated me on his lap, then
 cast me out again, and now seems to have
 installed my golden Image! 695

The Mother of Illusion is churning,
 out of the transient sea
 of phenomena, an endless series
 of venoms and elixirs. 696

How can I isolate a chance bubble
 from all the rest of the swell
 and roar, the ebb and flow, in the cosmic
 oceanscape of varieties? 697

All's well, indeed — when I see with the gift
 of the vision the Muni
 has opened in me . . . peace! I hear footsteps:
 it's early . . . who can it be?" 698

Sita strained her eyes at the wicker-gate
 and fixed her curious gaze
 on the coming phantom of a sister . . .
 unbelievable, but true! 699

Breaking down utterly, Śrutakīrti
 fell on the ground, and Sita,
 o'ercoming her surprise, raised her sister,
 spoke kindly, and brought her round. 700

There was little on Sita's side to say,
 but Śrutakīrti, having
 revived quickly, spoke on a wide compass
 of subjects touching them both. 701

All three sisters had become mothers too:
 Mandavi's sons were Taksha
 and Pushkafa; and her own princely pair,
 Subahu, Satrugathi. 702

And Urmila had two boys, Angada
 and Chandraketu: happy,
 happy, happy pairs, and now four in all,
 like the Raghava quartette. 703

She had been separated herself, said
 Srutakirti, for twelve years
 from Satrugghna, when he killed Lavana
 and ruled over his Kingdom. 704

Now that he was back, 'twas from him she knew
 about Sita's askesis
 in Vālmiki's Ashrama: "What playthings
 are we all to wanton Fate!" 705

Although Sita didn't make any pointed
 inquiries, Srutakirti
 knew them by her intuition and answered
 with understanding and tact. 706

"You wouldn't believe, Sita," she confided,
 "how with your hush-hush going
 away, our down-to-earth spontaneity
 has withdrawn from Ayodhya. 707

And Rama is become a prisoner
 in his self-forged loneliness
 and has made himself a burnt offering
 to his stone image, Dharma!" 708

Having blurted this out in a spasm
 of sudden irritation,
 she broke down again, and the hapless ones
 hugged and consoled each other. 709

Her armour of isolation having
 been thus pierced, some others too
 found it feasible to meet Maithili
 and revive the former links. 710

'Twas an effort, though, for the dividing
 walls of silence and distance
 and lack of authentic news had congealed
 the play of feeling and thought. 711

Some of these meetings were psychically
 'disturbing and exhausting,
 and if Kausalya could only embrace
 and cry in her helplessness, 712

and Kaikeyi's spurt of sincerity
 failed to find the proper words,
 'twas Sumitra's healing touch that transformed
 tears into the touch of Grace. 713

Mandavi's tell-tale leap of happiness
 needed no explication,
 and Urmila's mystic gaze seemed to see
 more than it cared to reveal. 714

One evening, Trijata arranged to bring
 Sarama and Anala,
 who had come with Vibhishana, to meet
 Maithili in her arbour. 715

Lanka was thriving, and Mandodari
 and Sulochana had found
 their inner peace and their positive roles
 in the new King's governance. 716

"Lanka is another Ayodhya now,"
 said Sarama, "and, I hear,
 Kishkindha qualifies as well: only
 Ayodhya isn't Ayodhya!" 717

Anala interposed: "What do we know,
 Mother, about the obscure
 intentions of the Divine? Ayodhya —
 Rama Rajya — where are they?" 718

Trijata took a deep breath and exclaimed:
 "The Divine isn't cabined in
 space or time, but in the pure human heart
 which is the Lord's sanctuary! 719

Yet see the long-suffering Maithili,
 the cruelly rejected!
 Aye, Ayodhya has cast her out, a Pearl
 far richer than all its past." 720

Sita firmly intervened: "A truce, friends,
 to all these inquisitions;
 caught between yesterday and tomorrow,
 we wriggle and know nothing. 721

We're wrong to treasure snug security
 and bright trinket-achievement;
 we've sometimes to lie low, bear all, and sport
abhaya: that's *tapasya*." 722

"Tapasya!" echoed Vibhishana's Queen;
 "that fits my sister as well,
 the blameless ochre-robed Mandodari
 wholly centered in the Self. 723

But have you heard the unbelievable?

In the new dispensation
Surpanakha herself has changed a lot,
and haunts Chaitya Prasada!" 724

That other paragon of rectitude
and feminine grace, Tara,
paid a brief visit to Sita's harbour
and conveyed her speechless love. 725

At last Sita herself, with the Muni's
permission, initiated
visits to two of the hermitages
in the sprawling Mandala. 726

Rama's invitation to the great ones,
the Masters of Askesis,
had brought to Naimisa Visvamitra,
Agastya and Gautama. 727

Like many other visiting Rishis,
these had their separate huts
and attended the sacrificial rites
whenever Vasishtha called 728

Late one night, Vasu guided Maithili,
first to Gautama's harbour
where the ageless and serene Ahalya
gave her a protective hug: 729

"Ah Sita, I met you and your sisters,
all bathed in your bridal bliss,
a few days after my resurrection
and reunion with my Lord. 730

I saw even then a cloud far distant,
no bigger than a thumb's size,
and prayed it would recede and disappear:
alas, we're playthings of fate. 731

I'm glad to see you again, on the eve
of the climactic moment
in your life, when the world wins you again,
or the Mother reclaims you!" 732

In Agastya's secluded hermitage,
Sita met Lopamudra
and made obeisance and sat at her feet:
and silence reigned for a while. 733

Then the fabulous hermit-heroine
gathered the prostrate Sita
and spoke caressingly: "I knew it all
when you saw me years ago. 734

Woman, woman, her name is suffering,
and she needs must play her role,
and humanise and divinise the world
of Man — of destructive Man! 735

My husband read the future, gave Rama
a quiverful of deadly
arrows, and later, on the battlefield,
the potent 'Hymn to the Sun.' 736

But Maithili, with my poor woman's heart
of compassion, what could I,
except beat back my vague apprehensions
and pray, and hope for the best? 737

Goodbye, my child, — the worst is yet to be,
and that's the best; O my child,
my bosom as a bed will receive you,
and heal your wounds for ever." 738

Just then walked in Arundhati, as if
there was an assignation:
and she embraced Sita in all the warmth
of adoration and love. 739

"Not you, Sita," said the sainted Shakti,
"but we the elders are blest:
we see you in your blinding radiance
prefiguring the New Dawn." 740

A great deal moved, and somewhat shaken too,
Maithili traced back her steps
and was in her sanctuary once more
awaiting the nameless Tryst. 741

Canto 76: Sita's Vindication and Withdrawal

And another day, and another span
of the saga projecting
the itinerary in Dandaka,
and on to Panchavati. 742

As more days followed, one fateful evening
the involved rhapsodist twins
wafted the surrendered congregation
to the Asoka pleasance. 743

Once had a daughter of Mithila wept
confined to the petty space
under the Simsupa; and ten thousand
pairs of eyes now streamed forth tears. 744

A Monkey had made a spectacular
leap, setting Lanka on fire:
and ten thousand listeners now enacted
those feats in their minds again. 745

Then on the last day of the recital,
the sanguinary conflict
having ended in triumph for Rama,
what remained bar the shouting? 746

And yet, when the cherubic twin minstrels
startlingly reversed the flow
of the music, making it crude and harsh
with Rama frowning, fuming, 747

and mouthing the abuse of distrust
at the gold-splendoured Sita,
ten thousand human hearts felt the deep wound
and gazed at the high rostrum. 748

Kakutstha's face was tense and almost pale;
and meanwhile the rhapsodists
changed the tune again, and sang of Sita's
feat of fire-vindication. 749

The rapt audience in the Pavilion
jam-packed to capacity
gave out a tremendous sigh of relief
and a thunderous applause. 750

The youngsters now continued their singing,
 and the happy Rasikas
 in their imagination felt carried
 in the air-car, Pushpaka. 751

The touching reunion with Bharata —
 the homecoming — the welcome —
 the crowning of Rama and Janaki —
 and the general rejoicing! 752

When the splendid relation of events
 rounded itself to a close,
 it was like the calm after a prolonged
 exposure to monsoon rains. 753

Relieved from the intolerable strain
 of the last sequence of hours,
 Rama took a decision and sent word
 to the revered Valmiki: 754

“I can see that the twins are my own sons,
 and their mother is Sita;
 should you permit her coming, O Muni,
 that would be appropriate.” 755

The Messengers returned with the Muni’s
 consent, and Rama announced
 that next morning Sita would come herself
 and attend the Pavilïon. 756

And Rama invited all those present —
 Kings, Sages and citizens —
 to assemble in the Hall in full force
 and witness the great event. 757

After a night’s suspense, when early dawn
 shone forth in all its glory,
 the festooned sacrificial Pavilion
 began filling up quickly. 758

’Twas an assemblage without parallel,
 and Rama received and led
 the Holy Eminences to their own
 duly appointed high-seats. 759

Like bright stars on a clear sky, the Rishis
 sat austere and radiant:
 Vasishta, Gautama, Visvamitra,
 Narada, Dhîrgatamas; 760

Durvasa, Chyavana, Satananda, Agastya, Markhandeya, Bharadvaja, Garga, Katyayana, Jabali, Vamadeva;	761
also Pulastya, Sakti, Maudgalya, Suyajna and Suprabha: the Rishipatnis too, Arundhati, Ahalya, Lopamudra;	762
and other witnesses of the Spirit like Gargi Vachaknavi, the Venerable Devi Mānasi, and Mother Bhūmambika.	763
And the Queen-Mothers and royal ladies had their enclosure apart: and so had the visiting Rakshasa and Vanara royalty.	764
And, of course, the choice representatives of the classes, professions and the commonalty of Kosala: they were all collected there.	765
At this time of morning in Naimisa, when after a sleepless night of introspection and rumination Sita rose cloaked in silence,	766
she wore neither luxuriant raiment nor fabulous jewellery; the mild saffron-hued garment became her, matching her aura sublime.	767
She first paid obeisance to the Muni her benefactor-father who blessed her with moist eyes and, as always, with sovereign understanding.	768
On being informed by the Messengers that the vast congregation was waiting like a massive mountain-range lying tense and immobile,	769
Muni Valmiki started with quick steps, and Maithili trailed behind, her head bent down, her palms joined together, and her eyes pouring hot tears:	770

and as she closely followed the Muni
 like the Veda shadowing
 Brahma the Selfcreate, they were greeted
 by a spontaneous applause. 771

The melting spectacle of saffron-robed
 Sita evoked spasmodic
 outbursts: "Godspeed, Rama!" "Godspeed, Sita!",
 "Godspeed, Rama and Sita!" 772

Walking past the expectant assemblage
 of admiring, curious,
 awed, anxious, prayerful, penitential
 men, women, even children: 773

the choice citizenry of Kosala
 (some tongue-tied remembering
 their own guilt of foul-thinking and loose talk),
 the thousands of visitors: 774

the ochre eminences, the prophets,
 high-priests, potentates, princes,
 the exemplars of feminine charm, wit,—
 or sufferance, endurance: 775

a wide spectrum of traders, artisans,
 battle-weary veterans,
 the simple commoners, the rootless ones,
 yes, the disprivileged too! 776

Maithili was walking in the shadow
 of the Muni, and all eyes
 were turned on her, she was the sole observed
 of the huge congregation. 777

Her mind now stationed in ocean-stillness
 had left hopes and fears behind,
 and amidst all this unwanted display
 and thrust of the dramatic, 778

Sita withdrew into her deeper self
 and let her mind travel back
 and back along fond memory's roadways
 but purged of all emotion. 779

As though the old mechanism of Time
 had sustained a reverse kick,
 all Sita's yesterdays and yesteryears
 filed past her inner vision. 780

- And so from that Asvamedha background,
 Sita's Mind of Light switched back
 and raced o'er the years of tranquillity
 in Valmiki's Ashrama. 781
- In retrospect, 'twas the subdued twilight
 of the gods, past the present,
 and past the boyhood, childhood and advent
 of Rama's wonderful sons; 782
- the wormwood isolation preceding
 the Muni's ready welcome,
 the antecedent despair following
 Saumitri's stark confession; 783
- the winkless night she spent near Gomati,
 the silent ill-starred journey
 from Ayodhya greeted by ominous
 sights and sounds all the way long; 784
- and the early morning deceitful start,
 the overnight decision,
 a summary betrayal in response
 to the rumour and scandal! 785
- Unmindful of the teeming multitude
 and the queered expectancy,
 the engines of Maithili's consciousness
 speeded with the reverse gear. 786
- A swift glance at the brief felicity
 of their perfect wedded life
 after the auspicious Coronation
 on their return from Lanka: 787
- Ayodhya and Kishkindha and Lanka:
 the panoramic air-view:
 and those minutes of infernal anguish
 ere her leap into the fire; 788
- a petrifying confusion of shapes,
 'Rakshasa and Vanas, and
 in horrendous death-grapple — and Rama,
 Saumitri in lion-roles! 789
- Even the soul's inner eye felt blinded
 by the enormities, and
 the ear was deafened by cries of widows
 and hapless orphaned children; 790

Mandodari, Dhanyamalini, and
 Sulochana, how many;
 and alas for the bereaved of the world,
 the mothers, sisters, all, all! 791

Then past the creeping miserable months
 under the Simsupa tree,
 the sword of Ravana hanging above
 and ready always to strike. 792

What images of the great and the good,
 Añjanēya, Trijata! —
 and the misshapen wardresses were lost
 in oblivion's gaping jaws. 793

Maithili now grew obscurely conscious
 of the laureate Muni
 giving her a vast compassionate look
 and reaching a decision. 794

Advancing to Rama's august presence
 pushing gently through the crowd,
 Muni Valmiki, Sita's protector,
 spoke clearly for all to hear: 795

"O King, Dāsarathi! this same Sita,
 righteous, loyal to her vows,
 was left abandoned near my Ashrama
 because evil tongues had wagged. 796

These exemplary twins that Sita bore
 are verily your own sons:
 pledging my *tapasya*, I affirm this
 as unquestionable Truth." 797

While that supreme master of measured speech
 held the attention of all,
 Maithili stood serene and statuesque,
 as if waiting uninvolved, 798

and as her mind winged her far far away,
 she saw herself yet once more
 as the lone dove seized by the ten-hooded
 abominable serpent: 799

Lanka monstrous with his hydra-headed
 crown of five and five egos
 self-justifying self-stultifying —
 the dark Rakshasa reptile! 800

A tremor of intense pain passed through her
 at the thought of Jatayu
 the aged Vulture-King who barred the way
 of the Robber-King in vain. 801

In her sheer perversity of folly,
 alas, she had chased away
 her invincible guardians — her dear Lord,
 and the blameless Saumitri. 802

The Muni's word^o now seemed to be surcharged
 with a high sincerity,
 an apocalyptic intensity
 and the heat of urgency: 803

"I don't think I ever uttered a lie
 in the whole course of my life,
 and I've never sinned in deed, word or thought —
 I stake all on her behalf. 804

As she stood forlorn near my hermitage
 I saw her tell-tale Sun-like
 purity, and gave asylum to her,
 and I've watched her all these years. 805

Dear to you as she was, O Raghava,
 and knowing her innocent,
 still you gave weight to the world's abuse
 and chose to cast her away. 806

But she's truly the soul of purity,
 and her husband is for her
 the God of her scripture; and she's herself
 the Testament of her Truth." 807

After a quick glance at sainted Sita,
 the saffron-robed paragon
 of womanhood, Ayodhya's King, Rama,
 made answer with folded hands: 808

"O all-knowing Muni, what you've said now
 • does more than satisfy me.
 Once before she blazed forth the Truth for all
 to see, and I took her back." 809

But Sita didn't hear, for she was thinking
 of Khara's fourteen thousand,
 Surpanakha's wiles and menacing lusts,
 the back-lash from Saumitri! 810

- Another backward drift, and Maithili
 was revisiting the woods
 and recalling those adventurous years
 and memorable meetings: 811
- Lopamudra at Rishi Agastya's,
 the visits to Sutikshna's
 once early when they entered Dandaka
 and once again much later, 812
- and in between, the wandering exiles
 had happily made the round
 of the hoary ones in the numberless
 but scattered hermitages. 813
- A spasm of intense pain passed through her
 as she recalled Viradha
 the Gandharva, born as a Rakshasa
 to die at Raghava's hands! 814
- How soothing, cleansing, invigorating,
 thought Sita, to revisit
 Sage Atri's, meet Sati Anasuya
 and feel renewed in spirit! 815
- Then the pretty Chitrakuta idyll,
 Bharata's noble gesture,
 and so to Bharadvaja's Ashrama,
 and Guha's ministering . . . 816
- Now faster and faster the seconds raced,
 the exile was forgotten,
 Sita remembered friendly Ayodhya
 and her own splendid sisters. 817
- Ah there had never been a Kaikeyi,
 no harsh promises to keep,
 no hunchback around, no Coronation
 to Provoke her twisted soul! 818
- A brief look at the long-past green meadows
 of the bliss of married love, —
 and Sita swung her consciousness towards
 well-beloved Mithila. 819
- Look there, Ahalya, forever waiting
 for her redeemer, Rama;
 the approach of his steps could light the spark
 where reigned lifelessness before! 820

Once more in Janaka's benevolent
 realm; 'twas the same as before,
 a heaven on earth in love, and light, and
 largesse: greenness greeted her! 821

The wedding of the Lord and his Consort,
 the pure bliss of communion —
 the prelude to the marriage, the bride-price,
 the stringing of Shiva's Bow! 822

And there loomed beyond the mists of the past
 the formidable Rishi,
 the unique instrument of Providence,
 Kausika Visvamitra . . . 823

Those visits to the Ashramas around
 Mithila, and encounters
 with ambassadresses of the Spirit
 like Mānasi of the Dome! 824

Hazier and hazier seemed the scene,
 the girlhood and childhood years:
 the flowering in slow unperceived ways
 of her feminine psyche . . . 825

But hark! Rama seemed to be speaking still,
 addressing respectfully
 the venerable Muni, but also
 loud enough for all to hear: 826

"I vouch that the times we lived together
 essaying the holiness
 of wedded Love were a felicity
 beyond cavil or blemish. 827

But vicious scandal erupted again,
 and knowing her blemishless,
 I still cast her off: I seek forgiveness,
 O Muni, for my action. 828

I accept these twins before all the world
 as my sons, Kusa, Lava;
 and I'll receive Vaidehi too, when she
 reaffirms her purity." 829

The electrically charged Assembly
 of Sages, Kings, Purohits,
 Rishipatnis, hermitresses, traders,
 artisans, commonalty: 830

- and the invisible Vasus, Maruts,
and the celestial singers
hovering above and blotting the sky /
like a massed benevolence: 831
- the residents of all earth, all heaven,
and the entire realm between,
appeared to have converged there to witness
the Apocalypse of Truth. 832
- The very elements seemed desirous
of enhancing the moment,
and the Wind-God wafted a gentle breeze
dispensing sweetness and light. 833
- Rama was reaching the end of his speech:
he was asking the Muni's
forgiveness; he was accepting the twins;
but as for herself, — no, no! 834
- What was the King her Husband waiting for?
Did her marble purity,
a Fire that burnt Ravana's might of arms,
need further attestation? 835
- Goodbye, then, to dear visible Nature,
the rich flora and fauna,
the many-hued and polyfoliate
splendour of Earth-existence! 836
- What an infinity of bewitching
improvisations of shape,
substance, colour, voice, size, motion, life-style!
Goodbye to the darlings all! 837
- She lived again for a beatific
instant that seemed eternal
the mystical uniqueness of her birth.
from the womb of Mother Earth; 838
- she felt the climactic moment draw near,
and a tremendous inner
transfiguration greatened her being
and ordained her decision. 839
- She saw with a single arching movement
of her luminiscent eyes
that all were present — her well-wishers all,
and her mothers, sisters, friends; 840

and Raghava, Lakshmana, Bharata,
 Satrughna and Hanuman;
 and her dear sons, and Muni Valmiki;
 and she bowed, and swore her faith: 841

“Were it the Truth, my mind gave thought to none
 except my Lord, Raghava,
 may Madhav’s Spouse, my divine Mother,
 take me back to her Abode. 842

Were it true that in thought, word and action
 I’ve always worshipped Rama,
 may Madhava’s Spouse, my divine Mother,
 take me back to her Abode. 843

Were this I say true, that I know nothing
 greater than my Raghava,
 may Madhava’s Spouse, my divine Mother,
 take me back to her Abode.” 844

O wonder of wonders, O miracle
 surpassing all miracles:
 for, even as Vaidehi in her trance
 of absolute surrender 845

raised her resonant voice to the Mother,
 the ground opened at her feet,
 the Goddess Madhavi seized Maithili
 in her protective embrace, 846

and as the awed celestials rained flowers
 in an unceasing shower,
 Maithili shared Madhavi’s throne as it
 disappeared under the Earth. 847

For the denizens of the upper air,
 this was Sita’s transcendent
 hour of vindication and victory,
 and they sang a Hymn of Praise. 848

But the tens of thousands in the great Hall
 seemed stupefied by surprise,
 and divers emotions battled within,
 and Time for a while stood still. 849

Canto 77: Her Grace Abiding

Since the moment of the apocalypse
when the radiant Earth-born
was reclaimed by Madhavi in response
to her daughter's piercing cry, 850

Rama sat miserable, checkmated,
his head bent, his eyes misty,
his face drained of blood, his mind tossed between
grief and rage, till he burst out: 851

"Ah my Sita — beautiful as Lakshmi —
has vanished of a sudden;
never before have I so reeled under
the shock of pain and defeat. 852

Once I got her back from beyond the seas:
then why not now from the Earth?
Didn't the frightened Ocean God let me lay
a causeway across the main?" 853

Rama in his towering resentment
was terrible to behold,
and Sage Vasishtha rose at once and said:
"O King, hold back your anger. 854

You have been the unconscious architect
of a wide-sweeping action
involving the destinies of Devas,
Rakshasas and humankind. 855

Blessed by Rishyāsringa, Dasaratha's
putreshti led to your birth,
and in two weeks Visvamitra trained you
for your redemptive mission. 856

Then the resurrection of Ahalya,
the breaking of Shiva's Bow,
the marriage to Janaki the Earth-born,
the new Dawn in Ayodhya! 857

Seminal events are intricately,
if invisibly, dovetailed
like a web of mingled yarn ranging from
purest white to starkest dark. 858

It is the way of wisdom to acquiesce
in what the Gods have ordained;
as for Sita, her role having ended,
she has withdrawn from the stage. 859

The imperatives of Dharma alone
have moulded and ruled your life:
where's the room, then, for the play of anger
or personal preference? 860

The Asvamedha has ended, O King,
your princely sons have joined you,
the sainted Maithili reigns in our hearts,
and there's nothing here for tears." 861

The High Priest resumed his seat, but the clouds
yet hovered menacingly
over Rama's brows, and a chill silence
sat like an ominous guest. 862

Now springing up, as if on an impulse,
Rishi Visvamitra spoke:
"Rama, Kausalya's darling son, Sita's
eternal spouse: one word more. 863

Since the time you followed me to the woods
to help me in my Yajna,
I've watched you walking the razor-edged path
of time-defying Dharma. 864

You have, in fair and fierce weather alike,
carried out your ministry
and justified your manifestation
as the vanguard of the race. 865

These last three weeks, you've heard with attention –
like the thousands gathered here –
the Tale of the killing of Ravana
and of Sita's *sudhana*. 866

The Muni's song sublime will keep alive
for all the ages to come
the saga of your sojourn in the woods
with Sita and Saumitri. 867

This epic-song of your decreed exile
from Ayodhya's sovereignty,
the austere life in Dandakaranya,
the year of separation 868

when Sita's agonies and askesis
 became elemental fire
 and made possible through Ravana's end
 the righting of ancient wrongs: 869

your exile and Sita's tribulations
 had to be part of the play
 whose ramifications in Space and Time
 challenge our understanding. 870

But wherever you went — Siddhashrama,
 Mithila, Rishyamukha,
 Lanka — all earth, air and sky felt a change,
 and are not the same again. 871

Beat back, O Hero, the unrestrained rush
 of grief and anger alike:
 rise above the dualities, and shine
 as Dharma's great exemplar." 872

Rama's face relaxed somewhat as he rose
 and bowed to the two Rishis:
 then he turned, with a sheer effort of will,
 to face Muni Valmiki: 873

"Pardon me, O Mahakavi, Muni,
 Laureate of Compassion!
 You stepped in with your vast redeemer-glance
 when I failed my wedded wife. 874

Long years ago, King Janaka treasured
 that great gift of Mother Earth,
 and Rishi Visvamitra guided me
 to that invaluable Prize. 875

Janaka and his sylvan Videha
 had fostered her early years;
 and in her noon-time season of trial
 you too gave a Father's love. 876

You nurtured my sons and taught them the arts
 of peace, poetry and music,
 but I hadn't the sense or humility
 to accept your solemn word!" 877

Choked by a fierce push of remorse, Rama
 felt unable to proceed,
 and that embodiment of truth, Muni
 Valmiki, rose to reply: 878

“Kakutstha! upholder of the order
ordained by timeless Dharma,
do not give way to enfeebling remorse:
all is indeed for the best. 879

How about the loss to our Ashrama
where Sita reigned as Lakshmi,
and her marvellous twins as the dual
powers of Word and Meaning? 880

When the saintly Maithili the Earth-born
stood in tears amid the green
between the Ganga and the Ashrama,
Grace came knocking at our doors. 881

With the percipience of my *tapasya*
I saw all and suffered all,
and in our quiet spaces she just lived
the Yoga of Sufferance. 882

And Narada made me wise about you
and bade me indite the Tale
of your ending the Rakshasa's misrule
and of Sita's ministry. 883

And the bereaved Krauncha's heart-rending cries
coalesced with the poignant notes
of Sita's great anguish in Asoka
as the sruti of the Song. 884

All is changed for all of us, Kakutstha,
yet nothing, nothing, is changed,
for my Tale, as sung by your sons, declares
its own immortality. 885

Give us leave, O King, to return to our
respective habitations
neat or distant, and we'll cherish always
the gifts of the Sacrifice.” 886

With his calm restored, Rama accepted
the Muni's sage suggestion,
and thanking them for their ministrations
wished them a safe journey home. 887

“And O Princes, High Priests, Rishis, Sages!”
he added, “my sons, Kusa
and Lava, will in course of time become
the twin monarchs of the realm: 888

Lava of North Kosala, and Kusa
 of Ayodhya and the South;
 and may I hope I would follow after
 and rejoin Sita elsewhere!" 889

The huge congregation dispersed at last
 to the reverberation
 of Vedic runes of massive potency
 invoking the good of all. 890

The Nara, Vanara, Rakshasa guests,
 the Sages, Rishis, Munis,
 all the divers groups, classes, commoners,
 all began melting away, 891

and the whole sacrificial area
 in the Naimisa Forest
 presented more and more the vacant look
 of a derelict city. 892

It was with a heart heavy with unease
 that Rama, after 'farewell'
 to the last of his respected guests, turned
 his frank gaze to the future. 893

He had returned to his improvised tent
 bordering the Gomati,
 and an intolerable loneliness
 fell like a pall on his self. 894

His new-found sons were as yet strangers still,
 and had left for Ayodhya
 in the company of the Queen-Mothers
 and the three pairs of cousins. 895

Desiring privacy, he had also
 sent away his entourage,
 expecting he might recapture the calm
 of the nights in Dandaka. 896

Some more years, perhaps, may be a decade,
 he need'st must breathe the cold air
 of a world that his stance of rectitude
 had rendered void of Sita. 897

This was, however, nothing new to him;
 he had known separation
 before, and he could suffer it again;
 his hardened heart would bear all. 898

All passion spent, his ego mauled, his hopes
all flat, his spirits drooping,
his functions all weary, yet Rama's soul
gained a new sweep of seeing. 899

Now the broken pieces seemed to settle
into a causal pattern:
hadn't his High Priest called him an unconscious
engineer of destiny? 900

He had cast out Sita, yet Satrugna
was visible Ayodhya
in the Ashrama when Sita mothered
Rama's twins, Kusa, Lava! 901

Kosala was the body neurotic
but Valmiki's Ashrama
had proved the saviour soul of Ayodhya –
Providence had shaped the ends! 902

And now a startling flash of superlight,
and awakened Rama asked:
"Oh where's the Sundering, where's the parting,
where's the separative wall?" 903

In a climactic assertion of will
his Self cast aside the veil,
an influx of Delight flooded his heart
and thrilled his tired human limbs. 904

The dim-lit retreat was aglow as if
a thousand Suns were ablaze,
and he felt the glare of an ecstatic
splendour of revelation. 905

Shaken, yet greatened, by the fusional
reaction, he lisped the words:
"Sita is myself; Maithili, myself;
there has been no severance." 906

Caught as he was in that blinding glory,
his dazzled eyes saw nothing;
yet some deeper vision seemed to open
on the inner spiritscapes. 907

Consciousness flew back to the timeless time
before manifestation
began the divisive formulations
and killing dichotomies. 908

In that Sun-splendour of revelation
 the thousand polarities
 seemed to be wholly reduced to cinders,
 and only wholeness remained. ⁷ 909

And the customary chair he sat in,
 hard-backed, uncomfortable,
 might as well have dissolved or ceased to be,
 for sense-awareness was gone. 910

Only the ineffable two-in-one
 feeling of identity —
 beyond logic, reason and common sense —
 generated all that bliss. 911

At the very time Rama had this fit
 of delirious drowning
 or super-sensory detonation,
 there was fall-out elsewhere too. 912

Although the sprawling camp was deserted,
 there was residual life
 in a few of the widely scattered huts,
 for the last were yet to go. 913

And just when Rama had his amazing
 leap of transcendence ending
 his tragic isolation from Sita
 and affirming their oneness, 914

three others also, from diverse angles,
 saw the unearthly splendour
 in Rama's lightning-hit riverside hut,
 and made for it with all speed. 915

While Vasu and the rest of the Muni's
 disciples had left with him
 earlier, Trijata had lingered on
 to see her family off. 916

Now, as she stood in front of her arbour
 and fixed her gaze on Rama's,
 she saw earth and sky were tearing apart
 as though riven by lightning. 917

Oh could Time race back to that splendorous
 delayed Dawn in Ayodhya
 when Vasishta crowned Rama and Sita
 amid soulful rejoicings? 918

- Trijata's gift of seeing had never
 struck her quite so forcibly
 as now, for the gold-glow and indigo
 forged the marvellous Vision. 919
- From other points of vantage far apart,
 Lakshmana and Hanuman,
 when they turned their eyes of adoration,
 saw there the cloud-burst of Truth: 920
- Sita in her glory of holiness
 seated by Raghava's side
 with all the ritual magnificence
 wedded to the Sun-lit hour. 921
- From their divers favoured points they hastened
 and reached Kakutstha's cottage,
 as if the timing had been synchronised
 by an uncanny power. 922
- All three were at the threshold together
 like creepers of devotion
 that both intertwine and spiral their way
 to the soul-heart of the Sun. 923
- The moment mutual recognition
 affirmed their common scripture,
 the transfiguring radiance that had
 brought them close seemed to withdraw 924
- "Whither has fled," asked Trijata in awe,
 "the Vision of Blessedness?"
 Lakshmana was wistful, but Hanuman
 wore a transfiguring look. 925
- Just then, as in a dream of bliss and peace,
 Rama came out with the glow
 of a new experience of Delight,
 a crystal Felicity. 926
- All three made obeisance to Raghava,
 and after they had risen,
 Rama rained on them his understanding
 gaze, and spoke ambrosial words: 927
- "The scission is ended, and Maithili
 is for all eternity
 seated here in my heart's sanctuary,
 inseparable from me. 928

Her twin hands dispensing the desired gifts,
 she will redeem the children
 of this impassioned yet suffering Earth,
 and her Grace will never fail. 929

In our own terrestrial game of chess,
 the pawns, so adroitly moved
 by the rival players, laugh at them both
 for their false complacencies. 930

The longer the stretch of your steady gaze,
 the causal links seem clearer,
 and foul and fair become categories
 confused and tantalising. 931

Nothing, Saumitri, is here for remorse;
 Trijata, no room for tears;
 and Maruti, your Sun-like consciousness
 should bear witness to the Truth." 932

Trijata bowed low: "I've the Muni's word
 I might presently go back
 and keep inviolate the Simsupa
 that saw Sita's *tapasaya*." 933

Lakshmana said: "I'm no good at speaking,
 but the old anguish is spent:
 wherever Rama reigns, there's Sita too,
 and I'll serve them both, always." 934

And Hanuman, with a deep obeisance
 and his face suffused with light:
 "Wherever the Sita story is sung,
 there I'll be in attendance." 935

Three rapt faces: the psychic Trijata;
 the self-effacing Brother,
 Lakshmana; the sole-sufficing Bhakta,
 the intrepid Wind-God's Son! 936

Three convergent pairs of eyes, three candles
 of aspiration and faith,
 fought the forest's shadows and the grim night,
 and merged in a single Flame. 937

The brightness faded imperceptibly
 as Rama slowly withdrew,
 and the other three disappeared, one by
 one, in the forest shadows. 938

Ten thousand cycles of hibernation,
 birth, growth, flowering, fruition,
and fall, and once more winter! But the Earth
 renews itself, and endures. 939

The Earth never tires or stales or despairs,
 for the pulses of Sita's
heart of compassion sustain and foster
 our evolving Life Divine. 940

EPILOGUE

- It is finished, Sita's saga sublime,
the fitful recordation
of the aches, exultations, soul-searchings
of the blemishless Earth-born. 1
- 'Sita', the serious scholars affirm,
but signifies the 'furrow';
and they speculate 'Sita' might have been
a fertility goddess. 2
- Didn't the Hellenes weave their Eleusinian
mysteries of Life and Death
and Rebirth from the myth of Demeter
and her child, Persephone? 3
- When the rivers sank to a miserly
trickle between brackish pools,
when the once dense branches were now leafless
and the ground below sapless; 4
- when the skies were oppressive indigo,
and truant clouds elusive;
when hunger groaned its grim omnipresence,
and the fire-fumes rose above: 5
- then Mother Earth's furrowed face attracted
answering rain from the sky,
new life coursed through the veins of desert land
and the Earth was gay once more. 6
- But Sita, you were the gracious wonder
of the response of the Gods
to the cry of distress in Videha
wrung from Janaka the King. 7
- With your memories of primeval Earth
and timeless intimacies,
you spanned the agenda of the wind-stirred
wilderness of Dandaka, 8
- its penitentiary Hermitages
and the re-erberent chants;
then, in Asoka's imprisoned dolour,
found the Simsupa a Friend. 9

Your vesture of beauty and light of love
 matched your heart of compassion
whose infinity gave refuge to all,
 even the false and the foul! 10

And when Sun-splendour was ablaze betimes,
 the serpent-tooth struck again,
total eclipse covered the bright spaces,
 and all seeing became blind. 11

But Muni Valmiki saw you as Grace,
 made his Ashrama your Home
and his Poem your consecrated Shrine—
 our constant refuge, Mother! 12

NOTES

NAMES: The same person may be referred to in different places by different names. Thus Rama is also Raghava, Kakutstha (of the Raghū or Kakutstha line), and Dāsarathi (Dasaratha's son); Sita (meaning 'furrow') is also Jānaki (Janaka's daughter), Maithili and Vaidehi (of Mithila or Videha); Lakshmana is Sumitra's son, hence Saumitri; Hanuman is Anjanēya (Anjana's son) and Māruti (the Wind-God's son); and Ravana's son, Mēghānād (sound of thunder) is 'victor over Indra', hence Indrajit as well.

REFERENCES: *Sitayana* is divided into seven Books, each of eleven Cantos; and these are numbered consecutively from 1 to 77. Under each Book, the 4-line stanzas (or quatrains) are numbered continuously. In the Notes, the Roman numerals refer to the Books 1 to VII, and the Arabic numerals to the particular quatrain of the relevant Book.

PROLOGUE

1. Prakriti: phenomenal Nature (as distinguished from Purusha, the indwelling Spirit).
2. Shakti: the creative Energy of the Universe.
12. Grace: the prerogative of Divine mercy, generosity, and redemption.

BOOK ONE: MITHILA

The Bala Kanda of the *Ramayana* of Valmiki opens with Muni Valmiki and Rishi Narada discoursing on the contours of Human Excellence, the sage citing Rama of Ayodhya as providing the exemplum of the Ideal Man. Later Valmiki witnesses a hunter's cruel killing of a Krauncha bird and the heart-rending cries of his mate, and the shock of this tragedy makes the Muni spontaneously articulate the 'sloka' with its burden of 'soka' or compassion and four-spanned metrical adequacy. And in course of time he indites the *Ramayana* in that metrical form. Likewise, Narada meets Rishi Vyasa sitting on the river Saraswati's banks, and finding him

inexpressibly sad, advises him to compose a poem on the sports of the Lord, Achutya, Krishna. The result is the *Bhagavata*. In *Sitayana*, the celestial singer and traveller of the worlds, Narada, meets Janaka of Mithila and initiates the 'action' of the Epic.

1. Narada, Janaka: Narada, the self-created Brahma's mind-born son, saint and minstrel divine, apostle of *bhakti* (devotion to the Lord), and ceaselessly engaged in advancing God's work.

Janaka, King of Mithila (or Janakpuri) in Videha.

- 8-9. Yajnavalkya: "Janaka was not only a brave King but was as well-versed in the Sastras and Vedas as any Rishi, and was the beloved pupil of Yajnavalkya whose exposition of Brahmajnana to him is the substance of the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad" (*Ramayana* by C.Rajagopalachari, 1957, p. 21).

Gargi Vachaknavi the seeker and Maitreyi the Sage's wife figure in the Upanishad.

24. the Pearl and the Net: the metaphor of 'Indra's net of pearls' in the Mahayana Buddhist Avatamsaka Sutra. If you look at one of the pearls in the net, you see all the others reflected in it: such is the mystery of total intermingling, interpenetration and interfusion of everything in everything else, and in all things.
37. the Rakshasas: also referred to as demons, titans, Asuras, ogres, or prowlers of the Night. As a class they are the strong evil ones, though there are significant exceptions. The female of the species is likewise variously described as demoness, titaness, ogress, and so on.
62. Bhuvaneshwari: Earth the Mother Goddess.
84. The way of love and devotion: Narada is also credited with the authorship of the celebrated *Bhakti Sutras*.
89. The Matsya, Kurma, Varaha, Narasimha and Vamana incarnations of Vishnu.
- 118ff. cf. Valmiki *Ramayana*, Uttara Kanda, Cantos 65-7; also Bala Kanda, Canto 71.

140. the cow-goddess: Sabala, Surabhi, the cow of plenty born of the Ocean when it was churned by the gods and the demons.
- 180ff. the Horse Sacrifice: the purpose of the Asvamedha (Horse Sacrifice) was to free the Agent (here Dasaratha) from the inhibiting effects of past sins, and preparing the ground for the 'Putreshti' (putra-kameshti) or progeny-ensuring sacrifice.
- 220ff. cf. Brihadaranyaka, I.i.
226. Gandharvas: celestial musicians and semi-divine warriors.
266. Katyayani and Maitreyi: Yajnavalkya's two spouses.
268. incarnations of Shakti: cf. *Devi Mahatmyam* which describes the destruction of the demons by the divers manifestations of Devi or Mother.
343. Sakhambhari: symbolises the Divine Mother in her power to satisfy the infinite variety of human tastes, and alleviate hunger and thirst everywhere.
355. Mother Earth's pristine daughter: a reference to the myth of Demeter and Persephone (or Ceres and Proserpina). Persephone is carried away by Hades to the underworld, but later allowed to return to the earth part of the year. The legend is thus explained: the seed-corn is buried in the earth for a time, then it rises from the ground to sustain life.
367. The Savitri-Satyavan story is narrated by Rishi Markandeya in the *Mahabharata*, Vana Parva, Cantos 291-7. It is also the subject of Sri Aurobindo's great modern epic, *Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol* (1950).
377. Anasuya, see Book III, Canto 23; Lopamudra, see III, Canto 27.
455. the Stair of Yoga: 'Yoga' means aspiring for, and achieving, union with God or the Transcendent. One may take the Kingdom of Heaven by storm as it were, but for most it is a climb of the Stair of Yoga with its many steps. See Sri Aurobindo, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, 1955, and *The Four Yogas of Swami Vivekananda*, condensed by Swami Tapasyananda, 1879.

496. *tapasya*: askesis, a regimen of austerities, a season of self-absorbed concentration or meditation.
523. Madhavi, the Earth-Goddess, and Sita's mother.
625. 'Visvamitra': also Kausika (of the line of Kusa).
639. Ahalya: see note on II.30.
672. *Brahmatej*: soul-strength or spiritual force, in contrast to *Kshatratej* (676) or brute-force.
703. Tataka: see Valmiki, Bala Kanda, Cantos 25-6.
706. Vishnu and Vamana: see Valmiki, Bala Kanda, Canto 29.
828. wagering with Vasishtha: Harischandra adheres to Truth even when it means the loss of his Kingdom or the compulsion to put his wife, Chandramati, to death as a 'witch', till at last Visvamitra acknowledges himself defeated, and restores all to Harischandra.

BOOK TWO: AYODHYA

11. four constituents: chariots, elephants, horses and infantry.
17. Yama: God of Death.
30. Ahalya: her creator, Brahma, gave her to Gautama in perference to Indra who desired her. Biding his time, Indra disguised as Gautama seduced her in his absence in the early hours of the morning. (See also VI.676.) Challenging conventional morality, Ahalya — like Tara (Vali's wife), Mandodari (Ravana's Queen), Draupadi (who was married to the five Pandava brothers) and Sita herself — is lauded for her chastity.
- 69ff. Ruchi and Vipula: the story is related in the *Mahabharata*, Anushasana Parva, Cantos 75 and 76.
144. Yudhajit: Kaikeyi's brother and Vicegerent of Kekaya, assisting his aged father, King Aswapathy.
- 154: Arundhati: Sage Vasishtha's wife.
166. the prolonged feuding: see I.674ff.
- 172ff. the seven steps: cf. *Yoga Vasishtha*, 'Bhumika Jayah'.

Yoga Vasishtha embodies Vasishtha's teaching to Prince Rama.

223. *kusa* grass: used in Hindu religious ceremonies.

265ff. Kamban's Manthara exploits Kaikeyi's generous nature 'tself to turn her against Kausalya and Rama:

“Many will come to you for relief
From poverty and dire distress,
Thinking you are a Queen.
And will you beg of her (Kausalya) for means
Wherewith you may assuage their misery?
Will you be ashamed to ask
And turn the supplicants out,
Grieve for it
And sigh and pine and die?
Oh, my dear, hard is a life of dependence.”

(*The Ayodhya Canto of the Ramayana*: As told by
Kamban, by C.Rajagopalchari, 1970, p. 35.)

298. Sumantra: the King's charioteer and trusted Minister-in-waiting.

336. *preyas*, *sreyas*: the classic dichotomy between material and spiritual values, outer and inner well-being, the merely pleasing and the really good (Katha Upanishad, I.iii.1).

354. These ten and seven years: the number is mentioned by Kausalya in Valmiki (II.xx.45). The noted Sanskrit scholar, Vasishtha Ganapati Muni, in his *Mahavidyati Sutragranthavali* (Translated by Srivatsa Natesan, 1958), describes the *Ramayana* as essentially a musical composition of 7 Books representing the sapta-swaras (*sa, ri, ga, ma, pa, dha, ni*), and states that, when they were married, Rama and Sita were 16 and 14 respectively. But whereas he gives their ages at the time of exile as 25 and 23, I allow rather less than a year between the two events. Not long after the quadruple marriage, Bharata and Satrugna leave with Uncle Yudhajit for Rajagriha, and presently Dasaratha decides on Rama's coronation taking advantage of Bharata's absence. Thus Rama is 17 when he is exiled, and this corresponds with the age clearly specified by Kausalya.

411. not a woman in man's image: there is Valmiki's authority for this violence of retort on Sita's part, but in Kamban she takes her going to the woods with Rama almost for granted:

She went in and soon came out
Clad in bark and stood by him
And quietly held him by the hand and laughed.

She does grow angry later to silence his lingering hesitation and have her own way (Rajaji, *The Ayodhya Canto*, p. 69).

467. heartless as her Kekaya mother: see Valmiki, *Ayodhya*, Canto 35, 19ff. Once when reclining King Aswapathy laughed listening to the speech of a louse, his Queen wanted to know the reason for his laughter. He couldn't oblige, since that would have caused his instantaneous death. But she had demanded: "Tell me, I don't care whether you live or die!" And he had to expel her in disgust.

523. Bhāgīrathi: It was Bhagiratha's *tapasya* that brought about the descent of the Ganga (Himavant's daughter) to the earth; hence she is also called Bhāgīrathi (Valmiki, *Bala Kanda*, Cantos 42-3).

531. Prayag: modern Allahabad.

557. It's lucky we've left the city: Having left Ayodhya behind, Rama finds life in Chitrakuta "conducive to the contemplation/that opens to the Real". In Kamban (II.v.37), Rama readily exchanges temporal power and the attractions of the city of Ayodhya for the forest, its wealth of beauty and life, and its elemental intimacies:

The all-compassionate Rama, fleeing
from the sophistications
of scripture, the culture of the city,
made for open forest-life.

Justice S. Maharajan's comment on this verse is perceptive:

"In the artificial city, the handiwork of man is more in evidence than that of God. But when Man . . . goes into the forest and mountains . . . he feels humbled . . . and is overpowered by the unseen Presence of God" (*Kamban*, 1872, p. 37).

592. Arya: noble Prince! When he launched his monthly journal, *Arya*, in 1914, Sri Aurobindo explained that the word “in its original use expressed, not a difference of race, but a difference of culture . . . an ideal of well-governed life, candour, courtesy, nobility, straight dealing, courage, gentleness, purity, humanity, compassion, protection of the weak, liberality, observance of social duty, eagerness for knowledge, respect for the wise and learned” (*Views and Reviews*, 1946, pp. 4-9).
626. a gesture of gratitude: Kaikeyi had helped Dasaratha when he fought the Asura, Sambara, and tended and saved her husband when he lay wounded and unconscious. On his recovery, he offered two boons to Kaikeyi in his gratitude, but she had preferred to keep them in abeyance (Valmiki, *Ayodhya*, Canto 9, slokas 11ff).
724. a sin of past times: In his days as Vicegerent, as an expert archer, Dasaratha had released an arrow that killed a young anchorite of the woods, instead of the intended elephant. The boy’s aged parents had then cursed Dasaratha that, like themselves, he too would die one day from grief for a lost son (Valmiki, *Ayodhya*, Cantos 63-4)
738. Janaka and Sunayana: their visit—though not to Ayodhya but Chitrakuta—is related in Tulsi Dasa’s *Ramacharita Manasa*.

BOOK THREE: ARANYA

31. *darshan*: this is more than the physical fact of seeing; rather is it the Grace of self-revelation of the Deity (in a Shrine), the Guru, or the Elder, to the seeker or devotee. More than Sita seeing Anasuya, it is Anasuya revealing her inner Self to Sita. See also 204ff.
38. Savitri and Rohini: Savitri followed Satyavan even when he was being taken away by Yama (Death) to his world of Eternal Night. The cart-like constellation, Rohini, keeps close to the Moon (Chandra), unmindful of his ‘phases’ or vicissitudes; hence Rohini symbolises steadfastness in love and devotion.

53. *gunas*: There are three elemental prismatic qualities or modes or moods of being into which the Illimitable Permanent seems to divide itself when reflected in space and time and terrestrial life: *tanias* (gloom, darkness, inertia), *rajas* (passion, fieriness, kinesis), and *sattva* (goodness, poise of being). The large aim should be to go beyond *all* three *gunas*, feel enfranchised from birth and death and the divers dichotomies, and attain immortality (The Bhagavad Gita, XIV.20). In Sri Aurobindo's words: "The three qualities are a triple power . . . at the same time a triple cord of bondage. 'The three Gunas born of Prakriti,' says the Gita, 'bind in the body the imperishable dweller in the body' . . . Evidently, in order to be liberated and perfect we must get back from these things, away from the *gunas* and above them and return to the power of that free spiritual consciousness above Nature" (*Essays on the Gita*, SABCL, Vol. 13, pp. 416-7).
63. exemplars of askesis: cf. Sri Aurobindo's magnificently evocative description of the Rishis, the 'king-sages', the world-naked hermits, the ecstasies, the seer-poets, whom Savitri encountered while she was venturing through the deep "world-ways" to choose her future husband:

Some deeper plunged; from life's external clasp
Beckoned into a fiery privacy
In the soul's unassailed star-white recess
They sojourned with an ever-living Bliss . . .

The Infants of the monarchy of the worlds,
The heroic leaders of a coming time,
King-children nurtured in that spacious air . . .

Intuitive knowledge leaping into speech . . .
They sang Infinity's names and deathless powers
In metres that reflect the moving worlds . . .

(*Savitri*, 1954, pp. 433-6)

75. Mandala: a group or cluster of Ashramas.
- 107ff. Commenting on Sita's speech and Rama's reply, Rajaji (Rajagopalachari) writes: "This conversation occurs in the poem like the cloud that precedes the storm. It is the

artistic creation of a changing atmosphere and not a random casting up of facile verses" (*Ramayana*, p.129).

- 161ff. Gautama Siddharta too saw during his travels in the woods similiar extremities of austerity:

Some walked on sandals spiked; some with sharp flints
Gashed breast and brow and thigh, scarred these with fire,
Threaded their flesh with jungle thorns and spits,
Besmeared with mud and ashes, crouching foul
In rags of dead men wrapped about their loins.

(*The Light of Asia* by Sir Edwin Arnold, Jaico, 1949, p.76)

194. austerities and realisations: cf. 'The Four Austerities and the Four Realisations' by The Mother (Collected Works, Vol. 12, pp 48-71).
226. Sanatana Dharma: as a religion, "the most sceptical because it has questioned and experimented the most, the most believing because it has the deepest experience and the most varied and positive spiritual knowledge,— that wider Hinduism which is not a dogma or combination of dogmas but a law of life, which is not a social framework but the spirit of a past and future social evolution . . . its real, most authoritative Scripture is in the heart in which the Eternal has His dwelling . . ." (SABCL, Vol 2, p. 19).
262. the Mystic Fire: According to Sri Aurobindo, behind and sustaining ordinary fire (*jada Agni*), electric fire (*vaidyuta Agni*) and solar fire (*saura Agni*), there is the Mystic Fire, the fundamental or spiritual Agni (quoted in Satprem's *The Adventure of Consciousness*, 1968, pp. 336ff.).
321. Ilvala and Vatapi: The Rakshasa, Ilvala, would invite Rishi after Rishi for a meal, serve as food his brother Vatapi cooked for the purpose, and then ask him to come tearing out of the guest's body, killing him thereby. But Agastya, when his turn came, saw through the brothers' game, digested Vatapi, and burnt Ilvala with a mere stare, and thus rid the world of the Rakshasa pair.
362. Panchavati: the holy spot, on the banks of the Godavari, marked by the five fig-trees and not far from modern Nasik in Maharashtra.

365. Lopamudra's vision: Seers both, while Agastya feels gratified with Rama's coming since it may lead to the destruction of Ravana, Lōpamudra is apprehensive and resentful because of the possible consequences of Sita's involvement in the prospective elemental clash of forces.
411. autumn, winter: actually, Sharad and Hemanta. The 6 Indian seasons are:
- Grishma (summer)— mid-June to August;
 Varsha (rainy season)— mid-August to October;
 Sharad (autumn)— mid-October to December;
 Hemanta (winter)— mid-December to February;
 Sisira (cold season)— mid-February to April;
 Vasanta (spring)— mid-April to June.
- (See also VII. 18ff.)
415. *sandhya*: the meeting time of night and day; morning or evening twilight. (See also IV. 85.)
420. Surpanakha: her nails were large like winnowing baskets.
422. In Valmiki, Rama at first plays with Surpanakha's emotions, and directs her to Lakshmana. In both Kamban and Tulsidasa, Surpanakha comes assuming a 'beautiful' form, hiding her native repulsive ugliness. It is unlikely, however, that Surpanakha here and Ravans later thought that in their native form they were other than beautiful and irresistible.
457. Siddhas, Charanas: Siddhas were realised ones who had acquired special powers through penance, while Charanas were celestial singers and path-finders.
487. Asuric nature: even so, in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* (II.ii), Angelo is tempted by the very odour of sanctity about Isabella (she has been in a Convent) to make his outrageous proposal.
528. you have evil thoughts: The only possible explanation of Sita's conduct here is that she is so unhinged by her fear for Rama's safety that she recklessly makes the one wild allegation that will compel Lakshmana to leave her side and go in search of Rama. Later (642), Rama too blames Lakshmana for leaving Sita alone. "What then was he to

- do?" asks V.S. Srinivasa Sastri, and (taking his cue from the commentator Govindraja) offers an answer: "Lakshmana should have left the scene, should have come away a little distance, and hung about in the neighbourhood, letting Sita believe that he had gone after Rama, but not going too far, to be able to protect her in case of harm" (*Lectures on the Ramayana*, 1952, p. 381).
537. Nature seemed to feel: Attributing human emotions to the world of Nature comprising variegated flora and fauna, and even hills and meadows and rivers, is the figure of speech 'pathetic fallacy'. Indeed, in our 'bootstrap' universe, the interpenetration of emotions on a cosmic scale can hardly be viewed as absurd or fantastical.
564. seized Sita by her braid: Valmiki doesn't mince matters and describes the 'abduction' in all its stark brutality. In Kamban, Ravana uproots the Ashram cottage itself (with Sita in it) and carries it away to Lanka. Rajaji comments: "It is no sin or shame to an innocent woman if a villain behaves like a brute. Yet, mistakenly, we in this country look on the violence of a brute as causing a blemish to the woman's purity. It is in deference to this wrong feeling that Kamban departed from Valmiki here" (*Ramayana*, p. 328).
- In Tulsi Dasa's *Ramacharita Manasa*, although Ravana carries away Sita in his chariot, it turns out that it is but a ghost-Sita, and the real Sita rises out of the fire when the ghost enters it at the conclusion of the war in Lanka and Ravana's destruction.
582. Prasravana: A gorgeous flower-clad mountain on the way, whose top was the refuge of Sugriva and his four Vanara followers.
606. Jatayu fell: Commenting on Jatayu's intervention as described by Valmiki, Rajaji writes:
- "To millions of men, women and children in India the *Ramayana* is not a mere tale. It has more truth and meaning than the events in one's life. Just as plants grow under the influence of sunlight, the people of India grow in mental strength and culture by absorbing the glowing aspiration of the *Ramayana*.

When we see any helpless person in danger or difficulty, let us think of Jatayu and with firm mind try to help regardless of circumstance" (*Ramayana*, p. 175).

As for Sita's torment and tears here, and of Rama's presently, the apt comment again is Rajaji's:

"The mystery of incarnations is ever the same. They are weighted with the dust and tears of the body they have taken, and suffer and grieve like mortals" (*ibid.*, p. 175).

615. *tilak*: An auspicious vermilion mark worn by a Hindu woman on her forehead.
654. the pangs of partings: Rama's sufferings have been read by Vaishnava interpreters as being symbolic of God's mercy when even a single soul (here Sita), for whatever reason, has strayed away.
665. Kaikeyi: Rama here, as earlier Sita (581), are both for the nonce one with average humanity, and give sudden vent to their so long carefully contained resentment against Kaikeyi. But only for a moment, for the mood soon passes.
- 725, 728, 755. Ayomukhi is evil, to be thwarted in its designs and driven away; Kabanda is good temporarily veiled as evil, and now wins release from bondage, and is duly grateful; and Sabari is the pure flame of God-love attaining its consummation. Ayomukhi, Kabanda and Sabari indicate an ascent of consciousness that bodes well for Rama's mission of finding the lost Sita.

BOOK FOUR: ASOKA

'Kishkindha Kanda' as such is omitted here, but the events recorded in the Book figure briefly in Hanuman's retrospective narration when he talks to Sita in the Asoka Grove (Canto 42, 636-63).

- 25ff. (also III.558). my aggregated wealth: For a latter-day variation, there is the flamboyant and flawed hero of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), who displays in his own petty way the ancient Rakshasa Ravana's demented extravagance.

47. Karta-virya-Arjuna: King of the Haihayas, also known as Sahasrarjuna; he ruled long at Mahishmati having won rare boons from Dattatreya. Once he seized Ravana and kept him confined in a cage. But when Karta-virya-Arjuna carried away Rishi Jamadagni's holy cow, he met his death at the hands of the Rishi's son, Parashurama, who was in turn to be worsted by Rama (Vide Valmiki, Uttara Kanda, Canto 32).
85. *sandhya* prayers: like Gayatri (24 syllables) and Savitri (32 syllables).
106. *sruti*: the Bass in music, the etheric sustainer of song, the ground of all being.
107. Aswatha: the holy fig-tree whose roots grow upwards and branches downward; and all the worlds are contained in it (Katha Upanishad, VI.i).
128. 'Bala' and 'Ati-bala': strength and super-strength.
157. Jivanmukta: the liberated one, although still living; cf. Sri Aurobindo:

Although consenting to a mortal body,
He is the undying; limit and bond he knows not;
For him the aeons are a playground,
Life and its deeds are his splendid shadow.

(*Collected Poems*, SABCL, Vol. 5, p. 576)

Mind of Light: one of the overhead (above Mind) powers of consciousness deriving light direct from the Supreme.

175. Trijata: In Valmiki, Trijata figures as an old well-meaning and helpful Rakshasi, but Kamban makes her Vibhishana's daughter. I have enlarged her role by making her a clairvoyant prophetess and exemplar of devotion.
226. a curse: Once, on Ravana taking the nymph Rambha against her wish, her lover Nalakubara (Kubera's son) cursed that the next time the Rakshasa made a similar assault, his head would break into pieces. (Valmiki, Uttara, Canto 26). See also V.134, for an earlier curse in respect of Punjikasthali, and VI. 646 relating to Vedavati.

It may be asked how, when Ravana was under a curse already in respect of his outrage on Punjikasthali (Brahma's grand-daughter), he could later repeat it on Rambha and still escape immediate death. The plausible explanation is that, being an apsaras and one of Indra's professional seductresses, she could not attract the curse when Ravana forced her compliance with his desire. The new curse by Nalakubara, Rambha's lover, only reinforces the power of the earlier one, and conscious of Sita's fire-like purity, Ravana wisely refrains from taking the last fatal step. As for Vedavati, on Ravana's seizing her hair, she throws herself into the fire, promising to return with an immaculate birth to bring about his destruction. Anaranya, Ayodhya's King, also utters the prophecy that a scion of the Ikshvakus, Rama, will be responsible for Ravana's death. (Valmiki *Ramayana*, Yuddha, Canto 13, and Uttara, Cantos 17, 19 and 26).

- 260ff. the one-eyed, the one-eared: Ralph T.H. Griffith compares the relevant (but much longer) passage in Valmiki on the ugly and venomous ogresses to Ariosto's description in *Orlando Furioso*, Canto 6, of the monsters at the gate of the City of Alcina.
297. *sadhana*: a regimen of austerity and discipline aiming at inner or integral realisation.
300. *siddhi*: a progressive attainment or fulfilment.
304. that venomous crow: see IV. 421ff. and IV. 718ff. for a fuller description of the episode; also V.68.
391. 'I may not take you back': Valmiki's Sita expresses no such fear, but Kamban's does (Sundara, Uruk-kattup-padalam, 11).

SITA IN ASOKA VANA: When he takes Sita to his palace in Lanka, Ravana finds she is as unresponsive to his advances as before, and decides to lodge her in Asoka Vana and gives her a twelve-month respite to change her mind. In the meantime the wardresses are to tempt, cajole or frighten her and somehow bring her round (IV.54). Ten months later, he meets her in Asoka and personally renews

his solicitations. How about the intervening ten months? "We must imagine", says V.S.Srinivasa Sastri, "that between that time (of the abduction) and the time when Hanuman came, which was nearly ten months, Ravana continually visited her and tormented her in all sorts of ways" (*Lectures on the Ramayana*, p. 386). But I have assumed that Ravana, expecting his wardresses—the fair and ugly ones—to effect through their persuasions and threats a change of heart in Sita sooner or later, leaves her well alone for this period. Now at last, his patience sorely tried and his resentment and impatience mounting, he makes one more personal effort (this time accompanied by Mandodari and his other consorts) to win Sita somehow, and this happens to synchronise with Hanuman's visit on a mission from Rama to find Sita.

459. *Dhūmaketu*: comet or meteor; the smoke-coloured planet, *Ketu*
- 522-5. Surya's Suvarchala, etc.: fabulous married couples of antiquity, celebrated for the loyalty of the wife to the husband in fair times as well as foul.
525. Saudasa and Madayanti: see VII. 289-92.
535. Surpanakha: clearly different from the Surpanakha who started the fateful chain-reaction at Panchavati.
599. Vanara: this expressive word is retained, instead of the English 'monkey' or 'ape'. Like the Nara-Narayana alliance in Arjuna-Krishna, here it is Nara-Vanara (Rama-Hanuman).
- 665ff. Hanuman's 'flight': Hanuman's leap across the sea is elaborately described by Valmiki, Kamban and Tulsi Dasa in their recitals of the Rama story.
696. nectar mingled with poison: *amritam visha samsrishtam*, the paradoxical truth of the quintessential human predicament, and even of the mystery of incarnations like those of Rama and Sita!
735. red mark: *tilak* (see also V.69).
- 767ff. tumult in the air: Roused to a fury of rage by Sita's silent

excruciating suffering in Asoka Vana, Hanuman decrees havoc and lets loose destruction and demoralisation in Lanka. It all happens with such precipitancy that one can hardly have a sense of time. It is dramatic 'double time' really, at once a packed few hours and a stretch of several days! Also it is a mini-war, a forecast of the Rama-Ravana *yuddha* to follow.

800. Indrajit's minions: the intervention of physical force renders the occult Brahma force nugatory. But Hanuman pretends to be bound, for he is eager to meet Ravana.

BOOK FIVE: YUDDHA

- 46ff. the Honey Grove: After Hanuman's colourful report of his finding Sita, mauling the Asoka Grove and meeting Ravana, there is sudden relief for the Vanaras after all the months, weeks, days and hours of anxiety, frustration, near-despair and lingering hope. In their new-found exuberance, they lose their balance in the Honey Grove. Valmiki devotes 3 Cantos (Sundara, 61-3) to this episode.
- 91ff. When Hanuman sees Sita in Asoka Grove, she tells him more than once that, of the one-year grace-time given by Ravana, only two months remain. We may therefore suppose that total mobilisation of Sugriva's army and its long march towards the southern sea account for nearly six weeks.
134. Punjikasthali: see note on iv. 226. See also 556, 582, for references to her and to Ravana's other victims, Vedavati and Rambha; and VI.646, 654 and 683.
- 142ff. In Kamban, Vibhishana's recital of Hiranya's saga of nemesis occupies a whole canto, and is one of the most admired parts of the epic. See also V.905-6.
- 154ff. father's mind: Caught in a distantly similiar predicament, Brutus abandons his friend and benefactor, Julius Caesar, and joins the other side. Here is an extract from Brutus' soliloquy on the eve of his joining the conspirators:

Between the acting of a dreadful thing
And the first motion, all the interim is
Like a phantasma or a hideous dream.
The Genius and the mortal instruments
Are then in council; and the state of man,
Like to a little kingdom, suffers then
The nature of an insurrection

(*Julius Caesar*, II. i. 63-9).

176 my noble father: the episode of Vibhishana's act of surrender and acceptance by Rama acquires special significance in the eyes of the Vaishanava, for it is seen as an exemplification of the way of self-surrender to the Supreme.

191, 195: The way of self-surrender, *prapatti*, *ātma-samarpana*, is infallible. The Divine rejects *none* who seeks His protection.

Since the vicissitudes of the Rama-Ravana conflict are recalled here mainly in a series of reports to the tense expectant Sita by Trijata, Anala and Sarama, there is some zig-zag in the narrative, but the broad sequence of events is indicated below:

First day: Evening Ravana holds a meeting of his advisers (109ff).

Night—Vibhishana's agony of introspection (119ff).

Second day: Fuller meeting of Ravana's Council (125ff): Kumbhakarna participates, Indrajit insults Vibhishana who leaves Lanka with his ~~four~~ ^{few} followers, and takes refuge in Rama (197-8)

Third day: Rama's request—then threat—to the Sea-God (219), who agrees to a causeway being laid between Bharat and Lanka.

4th to 8th day (five days): the building of the causeway (221).

Ninth day: Landing of the Vanara army in Lanka (223). Suka and Sarana, Ravana's spies, show him who is who in Rama's army (227ff).

The cruel play of sorcery by Vidyuyijhva, and the fiasco of the false severed head of Rama (241-5). Ravana ignores his mother Kaikasi's and the wise Avindhya's advice and warning (257).

Council meeting again, and Malayavan's advice and warning (260-4).

Ravana organises the defence of Lanka (268).

Rama's dispositions point counterpoint (272).

Sugriva's solo attack and bouncing back in time (278-80).

Suka and Sarana directing Ravana's gaze to Rama, Lakshmana, Hanuman, Sugriva and other Vanara stewards (227ff) and later Vibhishana from Suvala mountain showing Rama Lanka's landmarks and Ravana himself on a tower (276ff) may be compared with Helen, in the *Iliad*, pointing out the main leaders of the Greek army to Priam, the Trojan King.

Tenth day: (and the *first day of the actual war*)—

Angada's futile message from Rama to Ravana (282-5).

Rama orders total assault and Ravana's counter-attack (343-6).

Indrajit attacks from an invisible vantage position and releases the serpent-darts at Rama and Lakshmana (354ff).

During the night, the Pushpaka takes Sita to the front and shows the 'dead' bodies of Rama and Lakshmana, and brings her back to Asoka Grove (311ff).

Eleventh day: (and the *second day of the war*)—

In the morning, Anala speaks to Sita about the magic serpent-darts and the instant relief and re-awakening on the golden eagle, Garuda's appearance (364).

Trijata later makes a report of Rama's first encounter with Ravana: Rama spares the Rakshasa King's life with the words, "Go back . . . and return to fight on a later day" (401-3).

Night: Ravana's dream, and Mandodari's and Sulochana's futile appeals (Cantos 49 & 50).

Twelfth day: (and the *third day of the war*)—

Meeting of Ravana's Council again, with Kumbhakarna forcibly awakened and brought to it (592).
Kumbhakarna's fall (613).

Ravana takes the Janaka-spectre to Sita, and is rebuffed (627ff).

Fall of Trisiras, Narantaka, Devantaka and Atikaya (655ff).

Indrajit again: Rama and Lakshmana bound (709).

Ravana's introspection (714-45).

The revival of Rama and Lakshmana on Hanuman bringing the magic herb *Sanjivini* (750).

Midnight attack on Lanka (772); death of Kumbha, Nikumbha and Makaraksha (788)

The exhibition of 'dead Sita' by Indrajit (820-4);
Lakshmana surprises Indrajit at Nikumbhila and kills him (848).

Ravana dissuaded from killing Sita in revenge (876ff).

Thirteenth day: (and the *last day of the war*) —

Ravana on the battlefield with Virupaksha, Mahaparsva (988).

The fall of Ravana (1048).

364. Garuda: the 'golden eagle', Vishnu's mount, is the constant enemy of the serpent race, and hence Indrajit's serpent-darts lose their potency the moment the Bird opportunely appears above the battlefield.

406. the Rakshasa King returned: owing his reprieve to his enemy, Rama, Ravana returns crestfallen to his palace. This is rather a new and humiliating experience for him.

RAVANA'S DREAM (Canto 49 & 50): I took the idea for Canto 49 and the next from 'The Dream of Ravana' published anonymously in 1853-4 in the *Dublin Magazine*, and reprinted in book form by Theosophy Company (India) in 1874. But except for the 'Dream' idea itself, there is hardly anything in common between that brilliant fantasy, which seems to have been conceived as a 'theosophic and mystic' exercise, and my own 'Dream' strictly related to the Sita-Rama-Ravana story. In introducing this 'Dream

of Ravana's motif, my intention was to show how enlightened Rakshasa womanhood—as in Mandodari and Sulochana, and not alone the members (Sarama, Anala, Trijata) of the Vibhishana family—reacted to Ravana's obsession with Sita.

430. Trisiras: different from the one who fought Rama along with Khara's fourteen thousand.

433. I can but see a daughter in Sita: In some of the versions of the Ramayana story, Sita is the daughter of Mandodari and Ravana. As a child she is abandoned in Mithila to evade a curse on Ravana, and is found, adopted and brought up by Janaka. For instance, with reference to a Jaina version, Gunabhadra's *Uttara-purana*. V.M. Kulkarni writes:

“The birth of Sita was a mystery, according to Valmiki's Ramayana. Gunabhadra wanted to give a realistic interpretation of her birth. He makes Sita the daughter of Ravana and Mandodari. He gives a reason for Sita's being abandoned by her parents, and describes how Janaka and his wife Vasudha came across this foundling. This change has something dramatic about it. A father falling in love with his own daughter, being unaware of the fact . . . , is not psychologically improbable” (*The Ramayana Tradition in Asia*, edited by V.Raghavan, 1880, p.240).

460. Sulochana: she doesn't figure in Valmiki, Kamban or Tulsi Dasa, but does in some other versions, as also in 'The Dream of Ravan.'

558. Anaranya: King Anaranya of the Ikshvaku race was killed in battle by Ravana, but before dying he uttered the prophecy that one descended from his race, Rama would end the Rakshasa's life.

559. Goddess Uma and Nandiswara: When Ravana threatens to uproot Kailasa and actually shakes it, Goddess Uma is rattled, and Shiva with a slight pressure of his toe pins the Rakshasa's hands as in a vice, making him howl for ages in pain and shame (Valmiki, Uttara, Canto 16). See also VI.708.

627ff. Janaka in chains: the episode, presented here in brief, is

fully elaborated in Kamban's *Ramavataram* (Yuddha Kanda, Canto 14). This bizarre event is, however, almost anticipated in IV.495.

703. surrender to Falsehood: The resort to magic, the propitiation of Evil, the ignorance of Good, may mean immediate success, but there is always a catch somewhere, and God is not mocked at all! This is realised by Ravana himself in his lucid moments (734, 745).
809. web of existential life: In this intricate and interpenetrating cosmos, the centre of action is everywhere, and sensitive Sita must needs experience all that is happening on the battlefield and in Lanka's homes as well.
976. stranger to the Power: In Valmiki, Rama regards himself only as a man, although several of his deeds appear extraordinary and superhuman; and here, Sita too seems to say that she is nothing more than a woman.
- 1004ff. Agastya initiates: 'Aditya Hridayam' figures in Valmiki, Yuddha Kanda, Canto 107, and is here condensed from my *The Epic Beautiful*, pp. 463-9.

BOOK SIX: RAJYA

16. Sita had cursed: IV.558-9.
31. her mother heart to compassion: As in V. 809, Sita must experience in herself all the world's misery.
87. Rama asked Saumitri: Just as earlier Rama will not enter Kishkindha, now also he asks Lakshmana to have Vibhishana crowned in Lanka as King. For 14 years Rama is banished, and he will not enter any city during this period. See also 256.
102. is there any who has never done a wrong? (*Na kaschit nāparādhīṇi*): "One does not know", writes V. Sitaran-iah, "if there is anything equal to it even in the *Ramayana*" (*Valmiki Ramayana*, 1872, p.173).

In Valmiki, Sita reinforces her point—the Arya ethic that will not permit the return of wrong for wrong—by

citing the words of a Bear to a Tiger in the following context. A Hunter pursued by a Tiger climbs up a tree where he finds a Bear who is friendly and declines, when requested by the Tiger to throw him down, to oblige. Presently sleep claims the Bear, and now the Hunter, on the Tiger's suggestion, pushes the sleeping Bear down. The Bear, however, catches a branch in time and climbs up to safety. Once more the Tiger makes its request to the Bear, citing the Hunter's unworthiness. It is then that the Bear speaks with calm and clarity to the Tiger, and enunciates the adamant Law, which is now recalled by Sita for Hanuman's edification:

Doubtless you know the story of the Bear
that, in the name of Dharma,
exhorted the Tiger to meet Evil
by Good, and not more evil.

The good are known by their unwavering
adhesion to Righteousness,
unmindful of what one's adversaries
or the unrighteous may do.

For the good, there's the innermost jewel
of inviolable Honour
to cherish, and this they needs must safeguard,
aye, whatever the hazard.

134. 'Aryaputra': Noble Prince; classical form of address (of husband by wife), "betokening love and respect combined" (Rajaji).
148. not of noble birth: this additional insult to the main injury figures in Kamban (Meetchi Padalam, 65).
- 150ff. Rama's words, like poisoned darts This terrible scene—as terrible in Kamban as it is in Valmiki—is muted a great deal in Tulsi Dasa. Following Adhyatma Ramayana, Tulsi Dasa makes the real Sita enter the fire before Ravana's coming, and it is a Maya Sita, a Shadow, that confronts him. While Rama engages in a game of manifestation to fight and destroy the Rakshasas, Sita is to abide in the fire

and wait on events. Thus it is the Shadow that enters the fire now, and the real Sita springs from it and rejoins Rama :

Rama, wishing to call forth her soul's inner witness,
Decreed she pass thro' fire to prove thus her fitness.
For this cause — to prove Sita faithful — with words
Seeming harsh the Most Gracious One spoke . . .

When Vaidehi saw a fierce flaming fire lighted,
She prayed — heart rejoicing, in no way affrighted . . .

She walked on flames cool as sandal-wood . . .
The fierce flames burnt her shadow and all the world's
slander,

but none of them touched her ;

None saw the Lord's works and ways . . .

Thus at Rama's left side in her beauty and glory
the fair Sita stood . . .

With fair Sita his bride standing there at his side,
Shone his glory unmeasured, unbounded.

(The Ramayana of Tulsidas, translated by the Rev.
A.G.A. Kinn, 1966, Vol. 2, pp. 764-6).

163. your green eye: Rama is for the nonce insanely driven to jealousy, and as V.S.Srinivasa Sastri observes:

"He (Rama) swayed between these two feelings (faith and jealous rage), and at first the worse feeling prevailed" (*Lectures on the Ramayana*, 1952, p. 172).

In his lecture, Sastri compares Rama's jealousy with Othello's, and contrasts it with King Arthur's and Gautama's. Desdemona like Sita was innocent, but Guinevere and Ahalya were guilty, but through tapasya they redeemed themselves.

176. Trijata . . . spoke bitter winged words: In Valmiki, none
• in the vast congregation protests against Rama's behaviour, and this is interpreted by Sastri "as proof that Sri Rama had established his moral superiority over the whole world to such an extent that he could do anything he pleased" (*ibid.*, p. 174). Higher than the 'moral' (in our times, military or charismatic) might is the 'human' imperative,

and it is Trijata the Rakshasi by birth that here raises the lone voice of protest.

256. Had I rushed to see you in Āsoka: There is the remotely parallel situation at the end of the Trojan War. According to one version, the injured Menelaus rushes to Helen's palace with drawn sword to kill her, but confronted by her great beauty he lets the sword drop . . . But what Rama says here is probable enough, and the 'raw truth' may have turned away the falsity of the suspicion.
283. delicate errand: Perhaps, it was not really to test Bharata but rather to let Hanuman see for himself Bharata's nobility and incandescent loyalty that Rama sent his emissary in advance to Nandigrama.
- 304ff. This Canto — 'The Coronation of Rama and Sita' -- draws freely upon my verse translation of the 'Rama Pattabhishekam' Canto (Yuddha, Canto 131) of Valmiki Ramayana, given as Epilogue II in *The Epic Beautiful*.
- 357, 360, 362, 366: the necklace of purest white: Sita, with Rama's consent, gives Hanuman the necklace she had received earlier from Rama, who had received it as Indra's gift from Vayu. The necklace is in addition to the "pair of spotless robes" given earlier to Hanuman (361). And it is special grace to give Hanuman what she has just received from Rama. But Hanuman, after all, is "the gem of the necklace" of the entire saga, and it is fitting he gets a necklace carrying at once Indra's, Vayu's, Rama's and Sita's own good wishes and benedictions.
449. Madhubani paints: See I.311ff.
516. branded as a defector: Michael Madhusudan Dutt, author of the Bengali epic *Meghanad Badha*, wrote to a friend that Ravana was "a noble fellow, and but for that scoundrel Bivishan (Vibhishana), would have licked the monkey army into the sea" (quoted in *History of Bengali Literature* by Sukumar Sen, 1860, pp. 218-9). And V.S. Srinivasa Sastri found on inquiry that many in North India (and some even in the South) looked upon Vibhishana as "a traitor, a betrayer", and added that he "should be possibly saved from his detractors" (*Lectures on the Ramayana*, p. 224).

580. Prajapati: see Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, V.ii.
- 612ff. Pulastya: the story of Ravana's antecedents is given in full in Valmiki, Uttara, opening Cantos.
711. the hefty girls of Sveta-dvipa: See Valmiki, Uttara, 5th of the 'interpolated' Cantos after Canto 37.
- 716ff. Hanuman: See Valmiki, Uttara, Cantos 35 and 36.
766. Turiya-self: (cf. Mandukya Upanishad); beyond waking, dreaming and deep sleep, a pure consciousness eternal and blissful.

BOOK SEVEN: ASHRAMA

- 125 lei her now have her desire: Commenting on Rama's action, as related by Valmiki in Uttara, Canto 45, V.S.S.Sastri says:
 "Now Rama decrees that Sita should be banished. This time Rama sinks lower and lower. Not only does he, against the testimony of his own conscience, decide to banish Sita but he does it secretly. He does not tell her." And Lakshmana is to play a dubious part, take Sita on false pretences to the woods, leave her there and come away (*Lectures on the Ramayana*, p. 179).
201. *ārgya*: water, and other offerings while welcoming a guest.
289. Saudasa and Madayanti: see earlier, IV. 525.
308. *darbhā*: a species of sharp-edged grass used for religious rites.
477. life-protector: Ozone.
- 485ff. Narada: Condensed from 'Prologue' to *The Epic Beautiful*, the 'Prologue' itself being an English verse rendering of the opening Cantos (1-3) of Bala Kanda of Valmiki Ramayana.
16. Book of Sita: it is here assumed that Valmiki indited the Sundara Kanda — 'Book of Sita' — first.
841. and swore her faith: Commenting on the corresponding climactic scene in Valmiki, Sastri says:

“One last scene yet, not less tragic than any that has gone before. But it is its own class. It transcends our experience, it defies our imagination, it leaves us speechless with awe, and with a feeling that we are no longer on earth” (ibid., p. 399).

EPILOGUE

3. Eleusinian mysteries: the great festival and mysteries that were celebrated in honour of Demeter and Persephone at Eleusis, a town to the north-west of Athens.